

Into the Breach

by pjmb13

Category: Halo

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Characters: D. Whitcomb

Status: Completed

Published: 2013-02-21 07:47:53

Updated: 2014-04-02 10:43:44

Packaged: 2016-04-27 04:03:58

Rating: T

Chapters: 20

Words: 84,952

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Spartan Michael-113 is an augmented super soldier. He has been given enhanced body strength and the latest equipment that the UNSC can provide, but under all the changes and equipment he is still human and he is trying to understand who and what he is as he faces off against an alien enemy. In war you not only face the enemy on the battlefield, but you also face yourself.

## 1. They're just dreamsâ€!

\_By the year 2536, the Human-Covenant war was over a decade old. All the human outer colony worlds had either been destroyed or abandoned due to the unending genocidal attacks by the alien Covenant forces and now the aliens had begun their invasion of the inner colony worlds.\_

\_The majority of successes against the Covenant came from the SPARTAN-II program, which was a highly classified black project that created the ultimate human soldier.\_

\_Spartan Michael-113 is one of those soldiers...\_

\_He has been given enhanced body strength and the latest equipment that the UNSC can provide, but under all the changes and equipment he is still human and he is trying to understand who and what he is as he faces off against an alien enemy.\_

\_In war you not only face the enemy on the battlefield, but you also face yourself...\_

This is a HALO story and contains an original character of my creation. I just want to say thank you to the creators, writers and designers of the HALO franchise. They have provided me with hours of enjoyment and entertainment. All characters are the intellectual property of their respective creators and publishers; this story may not be sold or distributed on a profit-making basis.

Thanks to all that read this story.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

\*\*CHAPTER ONE\*\*

><strong>They're just dreamsâ€|<strong>

\_The SPARTAN-II program was a highly classified Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) black project that sought to create the ultimate special operations soldier. The plan was to deploy these soldiers to deal with the growing insurrectionist movement among the human colony worlds. Under the direction of the brilliant Dr. Catherine Halsey, she employed controversial techniques to identify and "recruit" those candidates that met the genetic requirements for the program.\_

\_In 2517, six year-old children, identified by the recruiting process, were conscripted under secret UNSC protocol â€“ Naval Code 45812 â€“ and kidnapped from their families by ONI. To cover-up for the missing children and hide the program, flash clones were substituted in their place. To ensure that no suspicions would ever arise, these clones had genetic flaws programmed that would result in all the clones dying of an untreatable disease a short period afterwards. The newly "recruited" children were taken to a secret ONI facility on the planet Reach in the Epsilon Eridani system, where they underwent intensive physical and military training/indoctrination.\_

\_In 2525, when the children turned fourteen, they all underwent the second phase of the program â€“ the biological augmentation procedure that would enhance their bodies to allow them to wear the MJOLNIR exoskeleton battle suits that were being developed in conjunction with the SPARTAN program. Of the original seventy-five candidates, these experimental procedures resulted in thirty candidates dying and twelve candidates crippled and washed-out of the program, being reassigned to other tasks within ONI and the UNSC. This was also the same year that the UNSC made first contact with the Covenant â€“ a political, military, and religious grouping made up of multiple alien species that spanned a vast area of the galaxy.\_

\_By the year 2535, the Human-Covenant war was into its 10th year. All the outer human colony worlds had either been destroyed or abandoned by the unending genocidal attacks by the alien Covenant forces. Time after time human forces stood their ground to try to hold back the onslaught. Despite desperate, ferocious and bloody fighting, Covenant technological superiority would overcome the human defenses resulting in another defeat and retreat. The end result being that the Covenant would lay waste and "glass" human-occupied worlds by plasma bombardment.\_

\_Despite what seemed like an endless series of planetary sieges and evacuations, there had been a few scattered victories by human forces. The majority of successes against the Covenant came from when the SPARTAN-II's were deployed. The success and propaganda value of the SPARTANS resulted in the original reason for the program's development to be officially revised to allow for public consumption.\_

\_In 2536, the Covenant had begun its invasion of the inner colony worlds. Those surviving SPARTAN-II's along with the next generation

SPARTAN-III's continued to stand and defend against the unrelenting genocidal Covenant advance!\_

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

\*\*Reach, Epsilon Eridani System  
>May 23, 2536 â€“ 0935 Local Time<strong>

Doctor Sara Reeves was at her desk caught up deep in her daily routine of work. She'd been involved primarily with the SPARTAN program since she'd been recruited by ONI nearly five years ago. Her work was to review and evaluate the mental and psychological health of all Spartans in the program, but especially focus on the SPARTAN-II's. Her work days consisted of reviewing records, listening to audio recordings along with watching videos of the Spartans to try to analyze their mental health. There were occasions where she was able to follow up in person with a face-to-face interview with individual Spartans. Unfortunately, from her perspective, those were very rare occasions due to the war and the demands placed on the Spartans.

Even though Doctor Reeves had access to the Spartans and their records, there was still much about the SPARTAN-II program above her security classification level. When she had first started this job, she had raised a few protests about this lack of information. She felt it was important to know everything about their backgrounds and history along with knowing what type of training they had undergone to allow her to make a better psychological analysis. She had been harshly awakened into the world of "Black-Ops" when a high ranking ONI officer informed her, somewhat in a joking tone, that if they told her the whole story behind the SPARTAN-II program, they would then have to kill her.

With the implied warning in mind, Doctor Reeves focused on working within the narrow confines and restrictions of what information she could access and questions she could ask the Spartans. Over time she had been able to gather enough information to deduce some of the background details of the SPARTAN-II program. She'd been shocked by what she discovered, but she was careful to keep her thoughts to herself and to not leave any physical records to indicate what she had found.

When she realized what had been done to the SPARTAN-II's, she found herself torn by the moral implications that engulfed the program and that she was involved with it and by extension was helping to perpetuate the terrible wrong that was done. She spent many sleepless nights wrestling with her conscience, trying to decide whether to stay with ONI and the program or if she should go public with what she knew. It was only when she saw the latest reports about the war, seeing the harsh realities of the Covenant exterminating human world after world that she realized that the Spartans were providing the most effective defense against this unrelenting enemy. It was in that light that such moral quandaries seem to fade or at least take a backseat and she was able to find a solution to her dilemma. Though it went against her medical oath and personal feelings, she focused herself on her job to help make sure that the Spartans were able to continue fighting. There were still some sleepless nights, but those were easily overcome with sedatives and lying to one's self that they were working for the greater good.

Putting aside any personal qualms and focusing on her work, the doctor was getting worried about a disturbing trend starting to appear among the SPARTAN-II's that she'd discovered. She was finding that there seemed to be a marked rise in anti-social behavior that would normally indicate a trend towards what was considered psychotic behavior. All the medical records indicated that all the SPARTAN-II's were reporting problems sleeping and dream states. Individually, each Spartan were showing different symptoms and were at different stages, but taken together the group showed that there was a definite pattern curve to their behavior.

In some of the more extreme cases, individuals were not removing their battle armor and leaving their helmets on most of the time, even when not on missions or in combat areas. Her professional diagnosis was that this was an indication that those extreme cases were isolating themselves more from human contact. She was worried that could only result in a continued downward spiral in their mental health, eventually affecting their combat performance. She had already written up a memo outlining the problem with her concerns and sent it up the line. The only reply she had received was a terse response that acknowledged receipt of the memo and that it was being taken under "advisement".

Taking a moment as she realized that the military bureaucratic mindset was one mind that she would never be able to understand or analyze, she let out an inner sigh as she went back to her review. Opening up the file for a Spartan named Michael-113, she went over the latest medical information for this soldier. She cross-referenced the medical information with the limited information she was given access to about their military operations. From what she could tell, it seemed as if this Spartan was being assigned a lot of solo missions, though what type of missions and the activity involved was unavailable to her. As she continued to examine his latest medical data, a frown grew across her face.

The records were showing that Michael-113 was suffering from increased incidents of disrupted and troubled sleep, with indications of nightmares. Her analysis of his records indicated that this Spartan was not yet in the high risk group, but as a precaution, she updated his medical records to make sure that he was kept under closer observation when not deployed in the field. She also added a note to his medical record, recommending that his solo missions be reduced and that he be integrated into a team/unit structured environment to help reduce the psychological pressures on him.

As Doctor Reeves was finishing updating Michael-113's medical records, the particular Spartan of her concern was undergoing a mission briefing at another facility on Reachâ€!

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

As the ONI officer entered the briefing room, he saw the Spartan stand to immediate attention. The officer noted that the Spartan was out of his battle armor, wearing a standard UNSC Navy uniform without any insignia, except for one shoulder tag that was the emblem for the Spartans.

The ONI officer was an older man, with a number of missions and campaigns under his belt. Despite his own experiences, he found it somewhat hard to believe how many and types of missions these

SPARTAN-II's had been involved in, considering their outward youthful looking appearances.

Despite their size â€“ being bigger and taller than average â€“ on the outside Spartans gave no indication as to how "special" they were. The only hint that you could see, to give you a glimpse of who and what they were, was in their eyes and how they looked at you. In past wars it had been referred to as the "thousand-yard stare", but this was different from what the ONI officer had seen in his own eyes and other veterans. Studying this particular Spartan's eyes, he could see the familiar look of having seen war and death, but there was something else in there â€“ a determination along with something else that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

The officer reminded himself that this young looking Spartan had nearly twenty years of military experienceâ€¦ being a member of an elite group of soldiers that would take on the most difficult of missions and right now were the UNSC's best hope for fighting the Covenant.

"At ease, Michael-113," the officer said watching as the Spartan sat back down. Even sitting down at ease the Spartan looked ready to move in an instance to deal with any situation. His eyes were focused and analyzing everything around him, noting every detail.

"I was going over your mission logsâ€¦ Everything seemed to go as planned and you were able to retrieve the data module and take out that insurrectionist cell on Paris IV. Do you have anything to add to your mission report?" the ONI officer asked.

"Sir, I have nothing to add about the missionâ€¦ Everything went according to plan," Michael-113 replied.

The officer heard the Spartan speak and from the tone of the response he could tell that the Spartan was holding something back.

"You have a question?"

"More of a concernâ€¦ Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Go ahead."

"With the current state of the war against the Covenant, I'm wondering why a high percentage of my missions are still tasked to deal with human insurrectionists? The Covenant is the larger threat right now," Michael-113 asked.

The officer made direct eye contact with the Spartan, "Even with the Covenant threat, the insurrectionists are still causing problems with the UNSCâ€¦ That we have to divert precious resources like you to dealing with this threat speaks volumes to the impact the Innies are having on our war effort. We can't afford to have these traitors to humanity undercut us at this time during this war against the Covenant. You have a stellar record in operations against the Innies. That's why you're being tasked with these missions."

"Understood, sirâ€¦ But I would like to contribute more against the Covenant."

A small smile flashed on the officer's face, "Well you're in luckâ€¦"

As you're probably aware, the Covenant has started moving against our inner coloniesâ€| Two months ago they started by attacking and invading New Constantinople. Vice Admiral Whitcomb has been organizing and conducting the defense of the system and planet, so far he has been fighting the Covenant to a draw with them only managing to gain a small foothold planet side for now. HIGHCOM is currently organizing a relief task force to reinforce the system. You will be assigned to the relief force to provide Spartan support to the ground forces thereâ€| "

The officer noted the beginning of a small smile on the Spartan's face as he continued his briefing, "We have a secondary mission for you while you're planet side. We've intercepted communications from several insurrectionist cells that are located on New Constantinople. You're to track down these cells and eliminate them with 'extreme prejudice'. Do you understand?"

The officer saw how the half-formed smile quickly disappeared at hearing the secondary mission objectives.

"Yes, sirâ€| I understand," the Spartan replied with no hesitation.

"Your mission briefing package is available to download and has also been loaded into your battle armor. The relief task force is still assembling and it's planned that they will be heading out in three days' time."

"What kind of support will I have for achieving my secondary mission objectives?"

"Noneâ€| The secondary mission is on a 'Need to Know' basis. The Vice Admiral already has SPARTAN-III Alpha Company in-system. You will provide support to those forces, but they will not assist you with your secondary mission objectivesâ€| Any other questions?"

"No, sir," replied the Spartan in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Then you're dismissed," the officer said watching as the Spartan stood up to attention and saluted.

As the Spartan started to leave, the officer spoke again bringing him back to attention, "Michael-113â€| One more thing."

"Sir?" replied the Spartan.

"Good hunting Spartanâ€| "

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

On the outside, Michael-113 displayed no emotions while walking back to his room. But while he didn't display any outward emotions or give away his thoughts, on the inside he was a torrent of emotions.

\_Damn it! Another wet-op! I'm so damned tired of going after Inniesâ€| I should be fighting the Covenantâ€| That's where I'm neededâ€|\_

He briefly considered contacting Doctor Halsey to try and get the mission orders changed, but he knew that she wouldn't override or

question ONI mission orders.

He let out an inner sigh at the reality of his situation that he would follow and carry out all his orders as he had been instructed to. He was too good of a soldier to disobey his orders. The Innies were causing some major headaches for the UNSC, but it bothered him that the Innies didn't seem to realize that they were just as much a target for the Covenant as everyone else was?

I guess we're the only race in this universe that cannot only fight an alien race bent on our destruction, but also fight amongst ourselves at the same time, he thought with a sigh.

Upon entering his room, he didn't hesitate as he sat down in front of his terminal and brought up his mission package information along with all information regarding New Constantinople and the latest intel regarding the battle and disposition of forces â€“ both UNSC and Covenant. He spent the next several hours reviewing all the data, memorizing all the details and info he thought he would need to survive and complete his missions.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The dream came again as it always hadâ€| There was fire everywhere. He could hear people screaming for help and cryingâ€| There were monsters swarming everywhereâ€| It wasn't the Covenantâ€| The enemy were actual monsters that were feeding on peopleâ€|. He couldn't move. All he could do was stand and watch helplessly as voices called out. The voices taunted him, calling him "Murderer". He wanted to help, but there was nothing he could do. All he could do was scream back in a helpless voice, "I'm just following ordersâ€|" The voices laughed at him and his feeble excuses. "Who are you? What are you?" the voices asked him over and overâ€| \_

Michael woke up with a start, covered in a cold sweat. As he ran a hand down his face, he took deep breaths to relax and calm down. It seemed that after every mission the nightmares were coming with more frequency and becoming worse. He knew that being a highly valuable resource, they were constantly monitoring him. He knew that he wasn't the only Spartan that was suffering from problems sleeping and nightmares, it was how each of them was dealing with it that set them apart. He knew that John was on the extreme side â€“ it was now very rare that the Master Chief took off his battle armor let alone his helmet when not in combat. Michael knew that the others tried dealing with their problems by burying their feelings and focusing on becoming better weapons by training harder. He didn't want to cut himself off like the othersâ€|

I'm still humanâ€| No matter what happensâ€| I'm still human, he kept thinking to himself, trying to relax his body and clear his mind of the disturbing images.

Finally relaxing enough to lie back down, he closed his eyes and though it took some time, he was able to drift off to a slightly less disturbed, but still a restless sleep. Thoughts of â€“ Who are you? What are you? â€“ still echoed in his mind.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Despite the troubled sleep, Michael was up early and doing his daily

workout in the base's training facility. He found himself pushing himself extra hard this morning on the weight benches. He was currently bench pressing weights in the 1000lb range.

\_Focus on the weightâ€| Just focus on liftingâ€| Nothing else matters\_, he thought, concentrating on his breathing and trying to push all other thoughts from his mind.

Finally finishing his set, he put his weights down, he was caught slightly off-guard by a female voice from behind him, "You're Michael-113 aren't you?"

Sitting up quickly, Michael turned towards the voice. He found himself looking at a woman who appeared to be in her late-30's to early-40's. Out of habit, he quickly noted details about her body and how she projected herself. The woman was about 5' 4" in height and with a slight/slim build with short brown hair. She projected an air of knowledge and intelligence by the way she held herself and seemed to be studying him.

\_Must be a doctorâ€| She has that look\_, he thought, studying her a little more closely. Michael had been around doctors most of his early years that he found he could easily pick them out of a crowd.

"Yesâ€| I'm Michaelâ€| What can I do for you?"

"I'm Doctor Sara Reevesâ€| I was wondering if you have a few minutes to talk."

Michael considered the request for a moment. He thought he should be going over his mission package again and putting together his equipment. He was about to brush off the doctor as he'd spent the majority of his life around doctors of one sort or another and he was tired of the constant questions along with accompanying poking and prodding. The words started to form in his mind when he suddenly was hit by an unusual feeling and thought â€“ he found that he wanted to talk.

"Okay Docâ€| I can spare a few minutes, but then I have to go finish prepping for my mission. I'm shipping out soon."

Michael arched an eyebrow in surprise as he saw Doctor Reeves actually smile at his response.

"Excellentâ€| If you'll follow me I have an office setup where we can talk in private," she said trying to keep her excitement in check. Most times when she requested face-to-face interviews with Spartans they were usually resistant and didn't want to talk unless they were ordered to. She cherished the opportunities when she got a chance to do an actual interview session.

Michael kept a gap between them, as he followed the doctor, as to not make her feel uncomfortable as most people got uncomfortable by the towering size of the Spartans. Entering the doctor's office, he noticed just a desk with chairs on each side and a computer terminal on the desk. He quickly sat down on the chair that the doctor offered, settling in as the doctor took her seat on the other side of the desk from him.

Reeves didn't waste her opportunity as she quickly started off the conversation, "So Michaelâ€| How are you feeling these days?"

"I'm fineâ€| No worries," he replied with a shrug.

"How are you sleeping at night?"

Warning signals went off in his head, he knew he had to be careful answering this question. He knew that they monitored him on base and would be tracking his behavior and noted his sleep disturbances.

"I've been having some troubles sleeping, but you know how it is. When you're on an operation and in the field you don't get enough or proper sleep or in some cases you may not get any sleep until you're back on ship or back at base. There's just an adjustment and it takes some time," he replied using a matter-of-fact tone of voice.

"Uh-huhâ€| Is there anything particular in these dreams that bother you?" Reeves asked as follow-up, typing notes on the computer terminal.

"Noâ€| I just have these dreams. They don't mean anything," Michael replied trying to keep the hesitation out of voice.

The doctor easily picked up on the hesitation in his voice, "What do you dream about, Michael? Are the dreams always the same?"

"It's nothingâ€| They're just dreamsâ€| They mean nothing."

Reeves sighed in frustration, "Michaelâ€| I'm not the enemy here. I'm here to help you and the other Spartans. I'm here to listenâ€| not judge you."

Michael took a deep breath. The dreams were becoming worse, it was at this moment that he decided to take a chance and open up a bit to the doctor. He described some of his dreamsâ€| the monsters, the fire, the people screaming and crying for help. Despite taking a chance and open up about his dreams, he decided to minimize his risk and held back some of the more personal details from the dreams.

I don't need to be held back for "further evaluation"â€| not this time, he thought with some concern, watching as the doctor took notes.

"Is that everything? Are you sure there's nothing else you want to tell me?" Reeves asked.

Studying the Spartan, her experience and training was telling her that he was holding back from her. She found herself drawn to his eyes. She could see and feel the strength in there, as he returned her gaze, but she could also see pain there and she was surprised by how much that bothered her.

"I'm fine docâ€| I'm mission ready. Is that it?" Michael said breaking the doctor's concentration.

Sighing again in frustration, the doctor realized she wasn't going to get anything more from this Spartan right now. Even though she had

concerns about Michael's mental well-being, she had limited power within the scope of the program. Despite her concerns and misgivings, she knew that ONI wouldn't accept her reasons and grounds to hold this Spartan back for further follow-up.

A momentary guilty feeling passed through her, but she pushed it down as she spoke, "Yes, that's allâ€| for now."

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Quickly leaving the doctor, Michael displayed no outward emotions, but again inside he was a raging sea of emotions.

Maybe I should have told the doctor what I've been feelingâ€| But I've spent most of my life being studied and analyzedâ€| I'm tired of doctors and everything to do with themâ€| I just want to do my jobâ€| My dutyâ€|\_

He tried to push thoughts about dreams and doctors out of his mind as he went back to his workout. He tried to focus on that and preparing for the mission, but he found it hard to keep his concentration.

## 2. Departure

\*\*CHAPTER TWO  
>Departure<strong>

\*\*In orbit around Reach  
>Epsilon Eridani system<br>May 26, 2536 â€“ 1352 Local Time\*\*

Michael was in his battle armor as he performed one last check on his equipment before loading up and heading out to the landing pad. A Pelican dropship was waiting to shuttle him up to the relief task force gathered in orbit around Reach.

Once loaded aboard the Pelican, it didn't take long for the ship to leave Reach's atmosphere. As they continued their ascent to orbit, Michael took a moment to look out one of the view windows at Reach one last time. This was one of his traditions whenever he left on a mission. Any memories he might have had from before he'd been "selected" for the SPARTAN program had faded long ago. They now only came to him in the occasional infrequent dream as he got older. He never discussed those dreams with anyone as the flashes of people and places he had were always out of focus and cloudy, just beyond his grasp. Being a Spartan was all he'd ever known and Reach was home for lack of knowing anywhere else.

He watched as the planet got smaller as they traveled to make the rendezvous with the fleet. He pushed any thoughts of home and the past behind him and refocused on his mission. The supply ship should have been packed, but his ONI security clearances had made it possible for him to be the only passenger on this ride. To kill time before rendezvousing with the task force, he activated a video window on his helmet display, bringing up the mission package info again. Even though he'd already gone over the whole mission package several times, he wanted to review his secondary mission objectives again.

Even though ONI had made the elimination of the insurrectionist cells on New Constantinople a secondary mission objective, they still considered it a high valued assignment. ONI had intercepted several Innies communications packages and from those intercepts had identified several people and their locations on the planet. Rather than follow-up and apprehend these Innies suspects using planet-side resources, ONI wanted to keep this mission "black" due to the potential ramifications and windfall of intel. Michael was to locate the identified people and "interrogate" them to obtain any and all information about insurrectionist operations on the planet and then make the individuals "disappear". Any intel that he obtained would allow ONI to task Michael to "cope" with these threats.

As he reviewed the mission objectives and saw the word "interrogate", his hand shifted slightly, out of reflex, towards his combat knife in its scabbard on his left shoulder. He stopped himself, taking a deep breath before taking out his knife and checking the blade's sharpness and for any nicks. This was the one part of his job he hated, even after all the training and indoctrination and despite knowing the threat the Innies posed to the UNSC.

He had never voiced or showed his feelings about how this work made him feel. He'd realized long ago that this was "unfortunately" a part of his job and the role he had to play. That he was good and excelled at obtaining solid information from the enemy was the main reason he kept getting tasked with these types of missions.

As he reviewed the list of targets and locations, he wasn't worried about getting what equipment and resources he would need to complete his secondary missions. His ONI security clearance allowed him to access and get whatever resources he needed for his secondary missions "within the limitations of his mission requirements. His main concern was not letting the secondary missions interfere with what he considered the more vital and important mission "defending the planet and fighting the Covenant. From studying Vice-Admiral Whitcomb's bio, he was sure that the Vice-Admiral wouldn't be impressed with an ONI operation diverting resources away from the defense of the system. Michael knew that he would have to tread lightly and avoid making any waves while trying to complete all his missions.

Looking towards the front of the Pelican, he could glance out the cockpit window. With his augmented vision and helmet optics, he could easily see they were getting closer to the relief task force. He could feel the Pelican change direction and saw they were making an approach run to one of the closer stationed ships. He realized that the ship they were approaching was the UNSC Presidio, a Valiant-class super-heavy cruiser. She was the ship he'd been assigned to for the transit to New Constantinople.

The Presidio was designated as the flagship for the 29-ship relief task force going to reinforce the forces already engaged in defending the New Constantinople system. According to the battle operation orders that Michael reviewed, the relief force would also be carrying the 119th Marine Division, the 232nd Heavy Armored Brigade along with two ODST units. These units would be offloaded to reinforce the already deployed ground units. These reinforcements were designated to help spearhead the counter-attack to destroy the Covenant beachhead on the planet "before it could be reinforced.

If UNSC forces failed to destroy the Covenant foothold, the plan was to conduct a rearguard action to buy time to evacuate the civilian population. The problem with any evacuation was that New Constantinople, being one of the older inner colony worlds, had a population of 300 million people spread across the planet. Anyone that was even remotely familiar with logistics would realize that trying to evacuate that many people wasn't even in the realm of possibility with UNSC resources.

Despite any logistical limitations that hadn't deterred Vice-Admiral Whitcomb. He had already started to evacuate civilians from the planet. Michael admired the tenacity and strategic brilliance the Admiral had displayed so far as he'd battled the Covenant to a draw in space and contained their beachhead planet-side. Everyone knew that the Covenant held a huge technological advantage in space as it cost, on average, three UNSC ships to kill one Covenant ship. It was only on the ground where the UNSC came close to par with the Covenant. When Spartans were thrown into the mix they raised the odds into the UNSC's favor.

Michael felt the bump as the Pelican landed in the Presidio's landing bay. He remained seated until the loading ramp of the Pelican lowered. The sights and sounds of the landing bay and crew working greeted him as the ramp descended. Everyone was busy unloading other transports and readying equipment for the transit to New Constantinople.

As Michael exited the Pelican, stares greeted him from the ship's crew, working close by, as they saw him descend the dropship's loading ramp. As he moved through the landing bay, crews stopped and watched him pass by. Michael didn't pay them any notice, brushing them off as he was long used to the looks he would attract.

By this point of the war the Spartans had already built up an aura of legend from the battles they'd been in against the Covenant. Plus, because of their size, Spartans tended to stand out in any crowd. The consensus was that having a Spartan with you on a mission increased your odds of coming back alive.

Michael paid no notice to the looks of awe and relief on the crews' faces, making his way across the landing bay. His thoughts focused on the upcoming fight against the Covenant. Until this point in the war, he'd only been involved in a handful of missions against the Covenant. Those missions being recon or small unit actions in support of other UNSC forces. He could feel the need and the pressure he was putting on himself to prove himself against the enemy in a large scale operation.

\_This is my chance! I'm finally going to where I need to be!\_

It didn't take Michael long to exit the landing bay. His first task was to report in to the Presidio's Captain as he made his way towards the ship's elevator and the bridge.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Exiting the ship's elevator on to the bridge deck, Michael strode through to the main bridge viewing area. Like the landing bay, he again drew looks and stares from the bridge crew. His enhanced

hearing and suit's audio system picking up the whispers of the crew as he made his way past.

He had no problem picking out the Captain, standing looking out the main view window at the assembled task force. The Captain had an electronic tablet in his hand, occasionally looking at it. Michael came up behind the Captain, snapping to attention with a crisp salute.

"Captain Kwongâ€| Sierra-113 reporting aboard as ordered."

Captain Henry Kwong turned around, taking a moment to look over the Spartan standing at full attention in his battle armor. The Captain had been on operations before with Spartans. He had developed a healthy respect and impression by the presence they projected, their sense of duty and how they always got their mission accomplished.

Kwong returned the salute, "Welcome aboard Sierra-113â€| Stand at ease."

Michael stood at ease, seeing the Captain smile and hold out his hand to him. Michael didn't hesitate as he took the offered hand and shook it.

"I'm glad we have a Spartan with us on this run. Things could get ugly when we reach New Constantinople," Kwong said with a slight grim look appearing on his face.

"I doubt that the Covenant will be pleased to see us. We can only hope we'll ruin their day when we get there," Michael replied.

Kwong chuckled as a small smile replaced the grim look, "Here's hoping we rain on their party. I'll let you get squared away and get ready for stasis for our jump to Slipspace. The fleet should be ready for jump within 3 hours. If you need anything just let me know."

"Thank you, sirâ€| I appreciate it," Michael said saluting the Captain. After the Captain had returned the salute, Michael headed off the bridge for the stasis deck to get ready for the Slipspace jump to New Constantinople.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

When he reached the stasis deck, Michael checked in with the crew manning the station. They confirmed that his equipment was aboard and stored for the transit.

Due to design limitations of the Shaw-Fujikawa Translight (SFT) Engine, that allowed human ships to enter Slipspace making faster-than-light travel possible, the trip would still take at least 2 weeks. During this time non-essential personnel would have to go into stasis to minimize consuming air, power, water and food during the trip. Upon reaching the edge of the destination planetary system, the task force would come out of Slipspace, regroup and then make its way in-system. They would then unload the reinforcements and the ships would join up with rest of the system's defense forces.

Everyone hoped that this relief force would arrive before the Covenant brought in reinforcements. The Covenant had much more accurate and powerful Slipspace engines which again contrasted the technological edge they had over the humans. Either way the relief force would be in the dark about the status of New Constantinople until they exited Slipspace. The Navy was also putting together another relief force that would follow within ten days of this task force leaving.

Michael had been in stasis many times. The only thing that bothered him about the whole process was the dreaming. You kept dreaming until you came out of stasis. You couldn't wake yourself up, you kept dreaming until they woke you up.

He fitted himself into the stasis cryochamber, trying to make himself as comfortable as possible. He could feel his anxiety growing anticipating the stasis sleep. This was because of the dreams he knew he would experience while asleep, but there was no alternative.

He watched, taking deep relaxing breaths, as the technician came over and made sure that the cryochamber tubes were connected to his battle armor. The tubes would feed the chemicals required for stasis sleep into his armor. The bio-injectors, inside his battle armor, would pass through the chemicals, to preserve and maintain him, through to his body.

Michael saw the technician double check all the connections, giving him a thumbs up to tell him everything was good to go. As the lid of the cryochamber closed, he kept focusing on relaxing and breathing normally. He felt a sudden hard pinch, followed by a slight tingling feeling, as his suit's bio-injectors delivered the chemicals needed for stasis to his body. It didn't take long for him to feel sleepy and for his eyes to close. It wasn't long after that the dreams startedâ€!

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Captain Kwong studied the main bridge sensor display that showed the icons identifying the rest of the task force under his temporary command. He couldn't help but note that before the war with the Covenant, the size and strength of task force like this would have struck fear into the insurrectionists. Now fighting against Covenant, the hope now was that the fleet would have the local numerical advantage to offset the alien's technological advantage.

Since the start of the war the UNSC had captured a wide range of Covenant tech. But it took time to study, understand and reverse engineer technology you had no scientific familiarity with or understanding of. UNSC high command hoped to buy time to allow them to make the scientific breakthroughs to develop weapon systems equal or even superior to the enemy's.

Kwong always maintained a calm exterior, but inside worried thoughts about his mission and the war bounced around, \_With the Covenant locating and now invading the inner coloniesâ€! We may have run out of timeâ€! How much longer can we hold on?\_

Not showing any outward sign of his worried thoughts and anxieties to his crew, Captain Kwong turned to the navigation station, "Helmâ€! Set course for Slipspace departure pointâ€! Inform the rest of the

fleet to stagger their approach."

"Aye, Sir. Course laid in. Fleet acknowledges orders," replied the crewman manning the navigation station.

"Thank you, Helm."

The Captain then turned to a pedestal located just to the side of his station, "Hermesâ€| Please inform the crew to prepare for Slipspace jump."

A small holographic image of a man appeared on the pedestal. The shipboard AI looked at the Captain and nodded, "Understood, sir."

The AI opened a com link across the ship, "Attentionâ€| Attention please. We are preparing for Slipspace jump. All designated personnel prepare for stasis. Repeatâ€| All personnel prepare for jump. Thank you."

As the commands were passed to each ship, they started to pick up speed, moving in formation towards their Slipspace departure point. It didn't take long for the task force to reach the departure point. As the task force entered the departure area, each ship activated its Slipspace engine. On each ship, those crew members not in stasis, watching through viewports or video displays, saw the fabric of space-time ripped as an entry way to another dimension opened. Each ship entered its own portal, disappearing into Slipspace with the openings closing behind them, leaving no evidence behind to show that they had ever been thereâ€|

### 3. Arrival

\*\*CHAPTER THREE:\*\*

\*\*Arrival\*\*

\_The dreams were always the sameâ€| The world was on fireâ€| People were screaming and cryingâ€| Monsters were everywhereâ€| Michael could only watch helplesslyâ€| Sometimes the dreams were somewhat less disturbingâ€| He would see himself when he was five years oldâ€| He saw the blue sky and green fields of his homeâ€| The sun felt warm as he ran laughing through the fieldsâ€| He saw two people off in the distanceâ€| He couldn't make out their facesâ€| He tried running as fast as he could to get to them, but he couldn't get close enough to see themâ€| He could hear voices calling outâ€| asking him the same questions over and over, "Who are you? What are you?"\_

\_Michael could feel the dream state start to end and he was aware that he was coming out of stasisâ€| Just before consciousness returned, he had one final dreamâ€| He was in a room and a door opened on to a balcony and he could see outside a huge beautiful lake with the bluest sky and a forest surrounding the lakeâ€| He felt at peaceâ€| He saw a young woman he didn't recognize or had ever seen before standing on the balconyâ€| She was beautiful with her brunette hair, but it was her eyes that spoke to himâ€| They had strength, determination and love in themâ€| The young woman spoke to him, "I love you Michaelâ€|" and he felt joy and happinessâ€|\_

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

\*\*Outer edge of New Constantinople System  
>June 11, 2536 â€“ 1735 Local Time<strong>

It was empty and quiet on the outer reaches of the New Constantinople star system. Suddenly the emptiness and quiet of space was shattered as numerous portals tore open the fabric of space-time and ships re-entered normal space from Slipspace. The entries from Slipspace continued at staggered intervals. The fleet was out of formation and dispersed across this area of space. Each ship quickly made adjustments to reform up into its battle formation as they came out of Slipspace and their status returned to normal.

On board the UNSC Presidio, Captain Kwong was reviewing the fleet's status and dispositions on the sensor and video displays on the bridge. He had a slight worried frown on his face as the fleet struggled to bring itself back into battle formation.

That was one of the Covenant's tech advantages, their Slipspace engines and sensors were more accurate than they could jump complete battle formations intact through Slipspace into normal space. This gave the Covenant a tremendous tactical advantage as human fleets tended to end up arriving at staggered intervals and widely dispersed much like his fleet was currently experiencing.

We're lucky that the Covenant didn't have any picket ships out here otherwise it would have been ugly, the Captain thought letting out a sigh of relief.

Kwong turned to his ship's communication station, "Comâ€œ! What's the status of the fleet?"

The communications tech responded, "All ships have reported inâ€œ! No problems reported, sir."

"Inform the carrier Georgia to launch a combat space patrol of Longswordsâ€œ! Inform all ships to maintain EMCOM security protocols. No need to further advertise our presence to the Covenant." Kwong ordered.

The Captain listened as his orders were passed to the rest of the fleet.

"Comâ€œ! See if you can raise Vice-Admiral Whitcomb's fleet HQ. We should let him know that help is here."

"Aye, Captain!"

The Captain waited for what seemed like an eternity, but then the communications tech spoke up, "Sir, we're receiving a reply backâ€œ! It's the Admiral himself!"

"Put the Admiral up on my video display." replied the Captain.

"Aye aye, sir!" the communications tech replied as he quickly transferred the Admiral over to the Captain's video console display.

Captain Kwong watched as the image of Vice-Admiral Whitcomb appeared on the screen. It was a little fuzzy, but viewable and understandable.

"Vice-Admiral!" the Captain said coming to attention.

"At ease Captain! It's good to see you again. I had hoped it would've been under better circumstances." replied the Vice-Admiral with a slight tired smile.

"I share your sentiments, sir." replied the Captain with his own smile.

"What's your current status, sir?" the Captain asked quickly getting back to the business at hand.

"We're still holding on! We still have a good percentage of our orbital defense platforms still active, so with our ground defenses we're still containing their initial foothold. Ship losses are another matter! I'm glad you're here now. We've been using the fleet to counter Covenant reinforcement attempts, but you know what we are facing!" replied the Vice-Admiral sadly.

The captain nodded in understanding and then spoke, "Sir! I have ground reinforcements on two troopships. Once we unload we can take on civilians to evacuate from the planet."

The Vice-Admiral's tired smile returned, "That would be most appreciated Captain. I'll send the approach vectors that will bring you to the planet. My ships and orbital platforms will cover you while you unload. Can you transmit the 'order of battle' for the reinforcing units? I'll have my staff start working on how we can slot them into our ground force command structure. For your ships, Captain, I would like you to remain in charge of your task force! I'll have my staff transmit the fleet command codes and slot your force into our battlenet. After you unload, your ships will fall back to the fleet support area and we'll conference then with the rest of the task force commanders and discuss our dispositions and strategy."

"Understood, sir!" the Captain said coming to attention and saluting.

"Thank you Captain! See you soon." replied the Vice-Admiral returning the salute and ending the communication.

"Helm!" said Captain Kwong

"Aye, sir!" replied the crewman.

"Once we have received the Admiral's approach vectors, set course at best speed!"

"Aye aye, sir!" replied the crewman at the navigation station.

"Com! Once we have received the approach vectors make sure that every ship gets them. Have all ships maintain alert condition yellow. If we don't run into the Covenant beforehand, when we get within 100 light seconds of the planet have all ships go to battle stations!"

"Understood?" the Captain ordered.

"Aye aye, sir!" was the reply from the communications station.

"Comâ€| Also have all ships prepare for a quick disembarkation and unloading of all reinforcements and supplies to the planet's surface. I don't want to waste anytime hanging in orbit." added the Captain.

"Understood, sir!" replied the communications tech.

Captain Kwong sat down in his bridge chair, \_Now comes the hard partâ€| getting to the planet and unloading\_, thought the Captain as he maintained a calm exterior.

The task force changed direction towards the planet and increased speedâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael was out of stasis and fully-awake now. He couldn't really recall his last dream except for brief flashes, but this was the best he had felt coming out of a sleep in months. He quickly did a check of the systems in his Mark IV MJOLNIR battle armor. With everything checking out, he headed off to the equipment bay to gather his equipment and then head to the hanger bay for disembarkation to the planet surface.

It didn't take him long to reach the equipment bay. He could see that there was already a great deal of activity going on as the crew prepared all the supplies and equipment to be unloaded planet-side. To the outside observer it looked like everything was in a chaos, but to the trained eye it was a controlled and organized chaos.

He quickly located his equipment container that had accompanied him up on the Pelican. He opened it and went through the weapons stored in it. He pulled out his pistol first checking that the safety was engaged and then loading a full clip into the pistol and attaching to the magnetic hardpoint on his suit. He then placed five spare ammo clips into ammo storage areas that were built into his suit. Michael then reached in and grabbed his MA5 assault rifle which was the UNSC standard infantry weapon. He again checked to make sure that the safety was engaged and then loaded a full clip. He attached his assault rifle to the hardpoint on his back within easy and quick reach. He then grabbed and placed six spare clips into ammo storage areas on his suit. He finally grabbed four standard fragmentation grenades and attached them to his suit's hardpoints. He did another check of his weapons and equipment and satisfied that he had everything he needed for now. He closed the equipment container and headed towards the launch bay. The task force would be entering the planet's orbit in six hours. Michael planned on waiting there until it was time to disembark.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

As Michael moved through the launch bay, he saw the same kind of "chaos" taking place in the launch bay as he had witnessed in the equipment and storage bays. Men and equipment were busily being prepared and loaded on to waiting Pelicans for transport down to the

planet surface once the task force entered New Constantinople's orbit. Everyone knew that they couldn't waste any time. The longer they hung around the more tempting the target they became for the Covenant. This meant that everyone was rushing around, but there was no sloppiness. Everyone also realized that mistakes injured or killed people, so even in all this controlled chaos all the safety rules and precautions were being adhered to.

Michael stayed out of way of the crew working in the launch bay as the hours ticked by as the task force got closer to the planet and the tension on all the ships increased. He did occasionally offer help to those crew that were experiencing delays and difficulties moving some of the heavier equipment loads, but for the most part it was a sit and wait game for him.

As it got closer to disembarkation, Michael decided it was time to report into the ship's Loadmaster to find out which Pelican he would be assigned to for the ride down to the planet. He was just starting to head in the direction of where he had last seen the Loadmaster, when he heard someone calling out to catch his attention. His enhanced hearing and his battle suit's audio sensors could make out the voice over the noise of launch bay.

"Sierra-113!" Over here!"

Michael turned and he saw a marine waving in his direction. He used his enhanced vision and helmet optics to get a better look of the person trying to catch his attention. Michael smiled as he recognized who it was and made his way over, finally stopping in front of the marine.

"Geez! I heard that there was a Spartan on board this tub, but I didn't think it would be your sorry hulking ass." the marine spoke in a light hearted jest as he smiled at the Spartan.

Michael shook his head slowly as he looked down at Master Gunnery Sergeant Dave Schmidt. Michael had been assigned to support the Gunny's fire team on a number of missions against the insurrectionists. He liked working with the Gunny and his fire team as he had a lot of respect for the Gunny. Schmidt was a lifer in the UNSC Marine Corps and a cool level-headed leader in combat.

"Good to see you Gunny! I didn't expect you to have been assigned to this ship."

"Well they need troops for this operation and you know how it goes." Schmidt replied.

Michael chuckled inside his helmet.

"I haven't seen you since that Charlie Foxtrot OP on Arcadia! How've you been doing?" the Gunny asked smiling.

"I've been doing well Gunny! I was just heading over to the Loadmaster to find out which Pelican I'm assigned to"

"Hell with that! You can ride down with me and the rest of the team! I know that they would be happy to have a Spartan security blanket riding with them." Schmidt laughed as he slapped the Spartan on the back.

The Spartan followed the Gunnery Sergeant back to the troop marshaling area to join up with the rest of the Gunny's fire team. Michael stood looking calm and relaxed in his battle armor. Most of the members of the fire team recognized the Spartan as he and the Gunny approached as they had worked with him before and this brought smiles to their faces and an inner sigh of relief of having a Spartan with them. There were a few new members to the fire team and those marines could only look in awe and disbelief at having a real life Spartan standing with them that was going to be riding down with them in their Pelican.

Michael waited with the marine fire team as the time ticked down to when orbit was achieved. He could see the tension and nervousness build, but everyone kept pretty calm and cool as they talked, joked, slept or did whatever it took to take their minds off what was going to happen. Michael just kept to the side, watching everyone. He found it difficult to interact socially with those not involved with the Spartan program. So much of what he was and did was classified "Beyond Top Secret" that rather than risk breaking security it was easier just to stay quiet and not interact. It actually worked out well for him as he spent these last moments trying to recall that dream he'd had in stasis. It had been such a nice feeling.

If I could only remember what the dream was about, Michael thought as he tried hard to recall.

Finally the announcement everyone had been anxiously waiting for, came over the ship's com system, "Attention all Personnel! We have achieved orbit around New Constantinople! Commence disembarkation! Repeat! Commence disembarkation!"

Before the message even finished, marines and other military personnel that were heading down to the planet, were getting up and collecting their equipment. There was a tense quietness among the soldiers as they started moving towards their assigned dropships to load up. Michael followed the Gunny and his fire team to their Pelican and was the last to climb up the loading ramp. He watched as the marines secured their weapons and take their seats, strapping in. Michael waited until all the marines were seated and then squeezed himself in, making sure he wouldn't bounce around during re-entry.

The Gunny looked from his seat to where Michael was sitting as the Pelican prepped for launch, "You know what we need right now. Don't you?" he said smiling.

Michael chuckled as the rest of the fire team groaned, "Come on Gunny! How about you give us a break. Just this once!" Huh?" one of the marines said.

"Please Gunny! Take heart!" said another marine.

Michael looked around and saw some of the veterans smiling. This was an old established ritual of the Gunny's for every planet drop. Michael leaned back and as the sounds of a wailing guitar started to fill the troop compartment of the Pelican.

"You marines should learn to appreciate the classics!" the Gunny shouted over the music and vocals as "All Along the Watchtower" by

Jimi Hendrix played as the Pelican launched into space.

Michael studied the marines as they sat back and thought about what they were going to face on the planet below. He got a small smile as he saw the Gunneryman lean back with a happy look on his face, tapping his foot to the music.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

On the bridge of the UNSC Presidio the crew at the sensor stations got an energy spike on their sensor displays. They immediately raised the alarm.

"Captain! Slipspace rupture detected!" one of the sensor techs shouted causing the whole bridge to become quiet and everyone turned and looked at the Captainâ€!

"Shit! Not now!" the Captain swore to himself.

"Bearing and range?" ordered the Captain.

"Bearing 238â€| Rangeâ€| Make it just over 200kms." reported the sensor tech.

The Captain let out a flurry of orders, "Helmâ€| Bring us around to that bearing! Weaponsâ€| Bring the MAC on-line and prepare to fire as soon as we have a target lock and a firing solution! Comâ€| Alert the rest of the task force to prepare to engage and send a warning to the dropships to disperse!"

Captain Kwong heard a flurry of "Aye Ayes" from his bridge crew, but he could only watch out the bridge view windows and check his video display as his worst nightmare became real as two Covenant SDV-class heavy corvettes came through the Slipspace rupture into the middle of his task force unloading.

The two Covenant corvettes entered normal space and immediately started to engage the human capital ships with their heavy plasma cannons. The UNSC warships started to return fire. Unfortunately the Pelican dropships were caught in the crossfire and they could only try to evade the heavy plasma fire as they tried to desperately make their way to the planet's surface.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael was listening to the music and watching the Gunneryman when he detected the increase whine of the Pelican's engines. He could hear them start to strain from the power being increased and then felt the dropship start to change direction. He looked towards the cockpit and could see the pilots starting to make frantic course corrections.

The Pelican that they were on didn't have much of a chance or warning when the Covenant corvettes appeared and started firing. A shot from one of the corvette's heavy plasma cannons grazed by the dropship â€“ a direct hit would have vaporized the tiny dropship. Never the less the grazing plasma shot caused catastrophic damage to the Pelican.

Michael watched in horror as the hull, where the Gunneryman was strapped

into gave way. The last image that he had of Gunny Schmidt was of him being sucked into space. It happened so fast that the Gunny still had that happy peaceful look on his face. That image would stay with Michael for the rest of his life.

The rest of the marine fire team and Pelican crew were either sucked into space or died strapped into their seats. Michael held on preventing himself from being sucked out into space. His battle armor with its rebreather system, kept him alive. He could see and feel that the dropship was shaking itself apart. He knew he only had moments to get out of the dying dropship. He made sure that he had his weapons and pushed off to float across the troop compartment towards the hull rupture. He moved into the opening and looked out into space, he had a front row seat to the space battle taking place.

Michael watched as he saw the UNSC ships fire MAC rounds and missiles at the Covenant warships. He saw the shields on the Covenant warships flare as hits registered. He saw the Covenant ships return fire and saw hits on the UNSC ships. Caught in the middle were the dropships of the task force. He saw some of the Pelicans break apart from grazing shots spilling equipment and men into space. Some Pelicans simply disappeared as they took the full brunt of a plasma cannon shot.

Michael didn't waste any more time as he pushed himself out the hull rupture into space. It only seemed seconds later when the Pelican exploded sending fragments and debris hurling everywhere. Seeing the explosion, he immediately curled himself into a ball to try protecting himself and minimize any impacts, but it wasn't enough as a sizable piece of the Pelican struck him with a part of the debris catching him in the helmet. He saw a flash in his helmet, felt a warm wetness on his face and then there was blacknessâ€!

#### 4. Mr Spartan's wild rideâ€|

\*\*CHAPTER FOUR:\*\*

\*\*Mr. Spartan's wild rideâ€|\*\*

\*\*In orbit around New Constantinople  
>June 12, 2536 â€" 0518 Local Time<strong>

The cruiser heaved and bounced from another hit, "Damage report!" Captain Kwong yelled.

"Sirâ€| Plasma hit on deck 14â€| Venting air into spaceâ€| The compartment has been sealed offâ€| Casualty reports still coming inâ€| Also reports of damage and fires in Launch Bay 2â€| Fires are being containedâ€|" the officer in charge of damage control reported.

Kwong turned to the weapons officerâ€| "Wepsâ€| Maintain fire on the closest Covenant vessel!"

"Aye aye, sir!" the weapons officer replied.

The Captain felt his ship shudder as another barrage of Archer missiles was launched. They couldn't use Shiva missiles with their

nuclear warheads, not with so many dropships still in close proximity.

"Comâ€| Task force status?" the Captain ordered.

"Sirâ€| The frigates Highwayman and Quiet World are goneâ€| The frigates and destroyer Aftermath, Boy Blue and Snowy River are reporting heavy damageâ€| The carrier Georgia is reporting minor damage." the com tech reported.

The Captain was almost afraid to ask, "Status of the troopships and dropships?" he asked trying to keep the hesitation and fear from his voice.

"Troopships report no damage... They're withdrawing out of range and are going to land at the secondary landing pointâ€| The com traffic for the dropships is a messâ€| I'm still trying to sort through it, but it's bad, sir." the com tech responded.

"Thank youâ€| Keep working on it. Get me a status update on those dropshipsâ€| "

The Captain turned back to face the battle. He could see small explosions in space and he could make out the Covenant corvettes more clearly now as the range was decreasing. He could see their shields flare from repeated strikes by MAC rounds and missiles.

A bridge crewman spoke up, "Captain! Orbital defense platforms are engaging the Covenant ships!"

About time, thought the Captain.

The bridge crew watched as the combined fire of the surviving task force ships and orbital defense platforms quickly overwhelmed the shields on the Covenant ships. Kwong saw the shields on one of the corvettes flare brightly as they failed. This was soon followed by explosions detonating along its hull. Suddenly the corvette exploded in a bright searing white light causing the bridge crew to either shield their eyes or look away. The second corvette was trying to break off now and make its escape.

Oh no you don't you bastard! You're not getting away, thought the Captain angrily.

"Maintain fire on the remaining enemy targetâ€| I don't want him leaving here!" the Captain ordered.

The Captain watched as every ship and defense platform now concentrated their fire on the remaining Covenant ship. The alien ship struggled to escape and it appeared that it was trying to open a Slipspace jump point to escape. The Captain watched as the Slipspace opening started to form, but then it collapsed as the enemy corvette's shields flared brightly as they collapsed. Hits and explosions could now be seen striking and coming from the hull of the ship. The Covenant ship was no longer returning fire, but that didn't stop the UNSC ships from continuing their barrage of fire. They smelled blood and wanted the kill. It seemed like an eternity but it was only a few minutes after the corvette's shields collapsed that it too exploded in one final tremendous ball of fire and then it quickly subsided just leaving more debris floating in orbit around the

planet.

"Cease Fire!" ordered the Captain as he took a deep breath to release his tension with the realization that he'd survived another battle.

"Get me a status update on task force damage and casualties." the Captain followed up as he ran his hands over his face.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The first thing Michael finally noticed as he regained consciousness was the pain of the left side of his face and that he couldn't see out of his left eye. He could feel the blood on his face and he hoped that it wasn't too bad. The second thing he noticed was that he had some yellow and red warning lights flashing on his helmet display. With his good eye he quickly checked his life support systems. His rebreather system showed that he had 60 minutes of air left. He realized if he controlled his breathing and minimized his movements he could probably stretch that out another 10 minutes, but he was floating in space and he needed to either find a ride down to the planet or back to the fleet.

As Michael floated in space, he could see the debris of the space battle. He figured that the UNSC had either won or driven off the Covenant as he could still see the UNSC ships still in orbit. It looked like the unloading operations had resumed.

He wasn't sure of the status of his com systems as it was one of the blinking yellow lights, but he tried anyways, "To anyone listening! This is Sierra-113! Repeat this is Sierra-113. I'm activating my beacon as my Pelican has been destroyed. Requesting pickup!"

Michael heard static on his com channel, but then a voice seemed to break through the static, "Sierra-113! This is Pelican 243! I read you! I have your beacon and I'm on approach! Should be on you in 10 minutes."

Michael breathed a sigh of relief at his good luck, "I read you Pelican 243! Good to hear your voice. Confirm ETA 10 minutes! I'll just hang out here until you arrive."

The voice from Pelican 243 chuckled back, "Roger that! Just as long as you don't wander off."

Michael floated waiting for pickup. The ten minutes seemed like an eternity when floating in space and you were surrounded by debris and bodies from the destroyed Pelicans. Michael tried to not look at the frozen faces of the dead Marines. He recognized some of them from the Pelican he had been on. He wanted to remember those Marines as they were, not as frozen corpses drifting forever in space or until they burned up in the planet's atmosphere.

He caught a glimpse of the Pelican approaching him and rotated his body towards the oncoming dropship. As it got closer the pilot of the Pelican called again over the com channel, "Sierra-113 I have you in visual, but we have a couple of problems here!"

Michael sighed as he realized that things were going too smoothly, "Copy that Pelican 243â€| What's the problem?"

"We're having a problem with our O2 system and we can't cycle to decompress to lower our cargo door to bring you in." replied the Pelican pilot.

"How long to get another ride over to me?"

"That's the other problemâ€| All other dropships are busy. It could be at least another 50 minutes before one is available." the pilot said with some hesitation.

"You got any ideas?" Michael asked.

"Yeah I do, but you might not like it." responded the pilot.

"Go aheadâ€| I got nowhere else to go."

"How heat-resistant is your armor?"

Michael was at first confused over the question, but then started shaking his head slowly in disbelief as the pilot outlined his plan.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael watched as the approaching Pelican moved to come up underneath him. The dropship was moving very slowly and when it was under him it fired its thrusters to come to a stop. Michael could see the pilot waving to him and the Pelican fired its thrusters again to start rising up closer to him.

He was now close enough to reach out and touch the ship, "Pelican 243â€| I have contact."

"Let me know when you're secure." the pilot responded back.

Michael scrambled to the middle section of the hull on top of the Pelican and found the maintenance crew handholds. He reached out with each hand, grabbing a handhold and held on tightly. He managed to find a spot to dig his feet into to hold his lower body in place.

"Pelican 243â€| I'm secure or as secure as I'm going to beâ€| Let's go!" Michael said trying not to sound worried over this recovery plan.

"Roger that Sierra-113â€| Hang on tightâ€| I'll try to give you a smooth ride down." responded the pilot.

Michael felt the Pelican start to move forward and increase speed. He tightened his grip and tensed his body to brace himself across the top of the dropship. What they were about to attempt would have been impossible for a normal person. It was only with the enhanced strength of a Spartan that this was even a remote possibility.

The Pelican began its entry into the planet's atmosphere with Michael lying across the top of the ship. As the dropship got further into the atmosphere, he could see the heat being generated by the re-entry

as the plasma flowed past him like flames dancing in the wind. With Michael lying on top of the Pelican, the bulk of the dropship shielded him from the direct plasma heat generated by the re-entry and his battle armor protected him from the residual heat.

Surprisingly that was not actually the worst part of the flight. The Pelican re-entered at an angle with its nose up, so Michael had gravity working in his favor, pushing him flat and keeping him in place. When the Pelican finished its re-entry and hit the thicker atmosphere, it leveled out "that's when the ride got "really interesting".

As the dropship got lower, the air turbulence picked up which started pounding Michael, threatening to whip him around as he held on for his life. During the descent, the pilot kept in constant communication contact with the Spartan, but Michael could only do brief acknowledgements as he concentrated on keeping his hold on the ship as he was buffeted and battered by the air turbulence.

The pilot quickly radioed flight control. He wanted to get on the ground as fast as possible. He didn't know how much longer the Spartan could hold on.

"Flight control! This is Pelican 243! We are declaring an emergency and requesting priority for landing." the pilot called in.

It seemed like an eternity before flight control responded, "Pelican 243! We read you! What is the nature of your emergency as we have other emergency requests?"

The pilot took a moment to figure out how he was going to word this request, "Uhhh! Flight control! We need to land as we currently have a Spartan hanging on to the outside of our bird and we need to get him down safely."

There was another pause that seemed to last forever, "Uh! Pelican 243! Can you repeat that again? We thought you said that there was a Spartan on the outside of your ship?"

The pilot couldn't help himself as he smiled as he could picture the look on the flight controller's face, "That's an affirmative flight control! We picked up this Spartan up in orbit! We couldn't bring him inside! We need to get him on the ground now!"

The voice from flight control sounded like he was still having a hard time believing what he was hearing as he responded, "Uh! Pelican 243! You are Priority 1 for landing! Approach vector heading is 154."

The pilot had to fight to contain his laughter as the flight controller forgot to close the channel and spoke so that everyone heard on the open channel, "My god! A Spartan just did an atmospheric re-entry riding on the outside of a Pelican! Who do these guys think they are?! Don't they realize that you are supposed to be inside the ship?!"

"Sierra-113! We're 15 minutes out from the LZ. The turbulence should lessen as we get lower. We have priority for landing" the

pilot said in a status update.

All Michael could manage to say was "Rogerâ€|" as he could feel his muscles and body start to tire from holding on and the buffeting he was being subjected to. He continued to just focus on holding on.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

As they got closer to the LZ, the pilot saw a huge crowd gathering along the edges. He shook his head as realized that word of the Spartan riding on the outside of the Pelican had spread and everyone on the base wanted to see.

Following the directions of flight control, the pilot eased back on his speed as he continued his descent. He hit his thrusters and put the Pelican into hover mode and slowly eased the dropship into a vertical descent to the landing pad.

The last 15 minutes had felt like 15 hours for Michael. He only realized that he'd made it when the Pelican was no longer moving forward and he could feel it descending downward. He still didn't let go even though his hands, arms and legs burned and ached from holding on for so long. Only when he felt the dropship bounce and it no longer was moving that he knew he was on the ground. As he slowly released his death grip on the handholds, he turned his head slowly from side to side. He could only see out his right eye, but he heard a loud cheer and commotion around him. His body ached and protested as he lifted his head higher to look around. He was greeted by a huge crowd of UNSC personnel surrounding the landing pad and the Pelican, looking up at him cheering wildly. Michael was finally able to move his body more as it recovered. A medic was called as he got down from the dropship to help him remove his helmet and tend to his injuries.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Vice-Admiral Whitcomb didn't express any outward emotion as he reviewed the after-action reports of the relief task force. It had been a major stroke of bad luck that the Covenant had timed their attack when the task force had been at its most vulnerable. The Vice-Admiral reviewed the damage and casualty reports. That they had only lost two frigates had been a minor miracle. The damaged received by the other ships could quickly be repaired, so the majority of warships were still able to fight and reinforce his fleet. It was the losses in dropships and personnel that was the hardest to take â€" a full 35% of the dropships that were flying at the time of the attack were destroyed or damaged. In most cases where the damage occurred in space, it resulted in casualties â€" mostly KIA's. Some of the units that were being transported down were completely gone with no survivors along with their equipment and supplies.

As the Vice-Admiral reached the end of the report, the last paragraph caught his eye. As he read it, he could only shake his head in disbelief. It was a report of a Spartan â€" Sierra-113 â€" that had his Pelican destroyed. The Spartan was rescued by another Pelican, but due to mechanical problems, the Spartan had to ride down on the outside of the dropship during the re-entry and landing. The Spartan had also been wounded the whole time during his ride.

The Vice-Admiral made a mental note to follow up on this Sierra-113. He would be able to use a Spartan like this for his defense of the planet.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael was still experiencing some pain on his face with slight headaches, but the pain and discomfort was minor compared to what he'd endured during his augmentation. It appeared that when his helmet was struck by the space debris it caused a circuit to blow in his helmet and some of the fragments lodged into his face. The medics had patched him up quickly, telling him that he was quite lucky that he hadn't lost the use nor have any impairment in his left eye. The medics told him that he would suffer from headaches and have some blurry vision in the eye for at least the next week and they urged him to take it easy for now.

Michael found himself looking at himself in the mirror, taking in the change in his appearance. He now had a scar running vertically from the eyebrow over the eye socket and down his cheek on the left side of his face. He still couldn't believe that he hadn't lost the eye as he gently felt around the red and raw looking wound. The medics had told him, that in time he could get the scar removed by facial reconstruction, but as he studied the change in his face, he decided to leave it now. He thought it was a fitting souvenir to commemorate and remember the Gunny, what had happened in orbit and his wild ride.

He decided to follow the medic's advice and took it easy for a couple of days to make sure his vision has recovered enough, but it was hard for him to just sit around doing nothing. There was still a war going on and sitting around wasn't something a Spartan did unless the mission required it. After a couple of restless days of doing nothing, Michael notified Naval Command HQ that he was ready for deployment. The response was an unexpected surprise as he was informed to standby for orders. With this unexpected "time off", he decided to use this opportunity to follow up on his secondary mission.

One of the insurrectionist cells had been tracked to the small town of Ravenna. The town was a two hour Pelican ride from the base Michael was currently housed at. The UNSC military presence in that town and surrounding area was light as this town was located far from the fighting on the other side of the planet. Civilian refugees were just starting to relocate to the area as the fighting in other areas intensified. Overall the area was considered quiet. Michael's presence was sure to change that.

Using the ONI security clearances he had been provided, Michael arranged with the base commander for the "loan" of a Pelican for his use for this mission. The plan was for the Pelican to do a night drop several klicks out of town and Michael would enter the town on foot. Once there he would try to locate a local resident â€“ Kevin Anders. According to the briefing package, ONI suspected Mr. Anders of being a low-level insurrectionist supporter that had contacts with some of the major players in the area. ONI had ordered Michael to have a "conversation" with Mr. Anders and get the names of his contacts and any other intel he could gather. The goal of this OP was to be a quick and quiet "in and out" mission. Once he had completed his mission he would signal the Pelican for pickup from the same

DZ.

Michael checked his battle armor and weapons and prepared for the missionâ€!

5. You can never wash the blood awayâ€!

\*\*CHAPTER FIVE:\*\*

\*\*You can never wash the blood awayâ€;\*\*

\*\*On approach towards Ravenna

>New Constantinople<br>June 16, 2536 â€“ 2251 Local Time\*\*

The Pelican roared over the ground at low altitude towards its objective. Michael looked out the open cargo door of the dropship as it flew through the night sky. With his enhanced vision and helmet optics, he could see everything as clear as day as he watched the ground pass underneath the Pelican.

A voice came through his helmet com system, "Sierra-113â€! Two minutes to LZ."

"Copy thatâ€!" Michael replied to the Pelican pilot. He did a final check of his weapons and equipment bag attached to his battle armor. The Pelican began to slow down and started in for its approach to the designated LZ.

The Pelican pilot spoke again, "After dust-off we are going to move to our holding stationâ€! We'll hold on station for 3 hoursâ€! If we don't hear from you then, we'll make a pass over the LZ and then return to base and return at designated alternate pickup timeâ€! Understood Sierra-113?"

"Roger thatâ€! Hopefully worse case is a long walk home for me." replied Michael trying to cut the tension.

"Copy that Sierra-113â€! Hope you brought your walking shoes just in case." replied the pilot.

Michael could hear and feel the Pelican begin to slow down and start its landing approach. He watched through the cargo door as the ground got closer. The dropship got within six feet of the ground when he saw the green drop light come on and heard the pilot callout, "Go! Go! Go!"

Michael's training and instincts kicked in. He was out the Pelican's cargo door dropping to the ground moving quickly away from the dropship to avoid its engine's back blast as it quickly increased power and took off into the night sky. Michael quickly made it to the tree line surrounding the LZ, stopping and kneeling for a moment to make sure that the LZ was safe. The engine sounds of the Pelican quickly faded and he used his battle armor systems to check for any threats. The motion sensors, thermal optics and audio system only picked up the sounds of the nighttime landscape and those nocturnal animals indigenous to the area.

Michael quickly oriented his NAV system in his helmet to the location of Ravenna and started moving towards the town. He moved at a quick

pace as he estimated that it would take about 15 minutes for him to reach the edge of town at the pace he set. He recalled the intel he had studied on his objective and the town.

Ravenna was a fair-sized town with a population of just over 25,000. There was mostly agriculture and light industry in the town and surrounding area. The surrounding area had some low rising hills with forested areas and some heavy bush. With New Constantinople being one of the older "inner" colony worlds, it had been terraformed. Meaning that there were no threats from any of the wildlife that had been imported to the planet or that were indigenous.

Michael had some initial concern on how he was going to locate his target in the town, but it appeared that Mr. Anders had a small successful import/export business in Ravenna. ONI suspected that the business was being used to launder money for the insurrectionists and also provided Mr. Anders a cover to travel to different locations and to order and transport equipment and supplies that could be utilized in a military capacity. The business location was on the south-east side of the town where most of the industry and warehouses were located in Ravenna. Michael didn't expect Anders to be there at this time of night, but ONI had ordered that the building and facilities be "taken out". His first stop was going to be the business, where he planned on planting delayed-action incendiary explosive charges to take out the building and any supplies and equipment.

After visiting the business and planting the explosives, the next step in his mission was to make his way to Mr. Anders's home. Getting the address for him wasn't difficult as he maintained a visible presence in the town and Michael was able to find the address in the planetary electronic directory.

As Michael made his way to the town, he could see the glow of the lights get closer. He found his mind starting to wander as he reviewed and analyzed his secondary mission objectives. With the Covenant already having a foothold on the planet and with additional Covenant forces most likely already on the way to reinforce, why spend the time and effort trying to eliminate insurrectionists using a Spartan? It was inevitable that the Covenant would bring in massive reinforcements and that would make it almost impossible to hold the planet. The UNSC would be lucky if they would be able to evacuate even 10% of the civilian population. He knew that the Navy and Marines would defend as long as possible, but if the Covenant achieved space superiority it would be just a matter of time before the planet fell.

He continued analyzing ONI's mission objectives and they were almost taking on a fanatical vengeful tone "Remove these traitors to humanity" was the term that the briefing officer on Reach had used. Michael wasn't naïve about his role and what he had been "developed" for. He had a lot of experience under his belt fighting Innies. It just seemed that with the Covenant trying to kill all humans that humanity should be uniting rather than trying to kill each other or spending critical resources taking each other out. Michael pushed those thoughts from his mind to regain his focus as he got closer to his first target. Even as he pushed those doubts aside, he wondered how many of his other brother and sister Spartans had these same thoughts and feelings.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael was able to quickly locate and access Anders's business facilities. The security system wasn't too much trouble for him to circumvent. Michael had studied a satellite recon photo of the business in his briefing package, committing the layout to memory along with the optimal points to place the incendiary charges to destroy the building and facilities. He moved like a ghost through the darkness and shadows as he planted the charges and recorded information of what was being stored at the facility using his battle armor recording devices. He noted that there was a large volume of emergency food rations and medical supplies, which could be easily used to help with the refugees that had been created because of the Covenant invasion.

He found himself tempted to break radio silence to try and contact ONI on the emergency frequency to abort this portion of the mission. He found himself considering of going directly to Vice-Admiral Whitcomb to have him send in an ODST unit to seize these supplies based on an "anonymous tip". He let out a sigh as ONI's orders didn't allow for any deviation as they had been firm that all supplies and equipment had to be destroyed. Michael noted how close other businesses were to the targeted building and storage areas. He knew that there was the potential for "collateral damage", but ONI wasn't worried about any excessive damage being caused or potential of innocent bystanders being injured or killed. Removing the insurrectionist threat was the priority â€" at any and all costs!

Michael made sure that the charges were well hidden, setting them to go off in 90 minutes. This would give him enough time to go see Mr. Anders and have a "chat" with him. He left quickly to make his way to Anders's home.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Kevin Anders was trying to get a decent night's sleep, but it had been hard getting a good night's sleep ever since the Covenant had invaded the system and landed on the planet. The UNSC was putting up a good fight and had contained the Covenant for now, but Kevin was a pragmatist as he knew that if the Navy couldn't hold the Covenant in the outer colonies they sure as hell weren't going to stop them here.

There was much for him to do and arrange before the planet fell. He not only had to make sure that the insurrectionist supplies and equipment got off planet, he had to make arrangements for his wife and two children to get out as well. Anders knew that the Navy had already started evacuations of civilians, but they were starting with those towns and cities closest to the fighting and even then the majority of the civilian were being relocated to refugee camps on planet and only a very small percentage was being evacuated off-planet.

Anders was a committed insurrectionist as he believed that the power of the UNSC had gone too far and the laws and taxes they had imposed on the people were causing too much hardship. He had no love for the UNSC, but it was amazing how an alien species bent on killing you, your family and your race would suddenly make you cheer â€" at least quietly behind closed doors â€" hoping that they would be victorious.

He went over in his mind the arrangements he was making with his insurrectionists contacts to get his family off-world. His contacts had said that if he got the huge supply of food and medical supplies, currently in his business's storage areas, off-world to the hidden insurrectionist supply base located in the Eridanus system.

Arrangements then would be made to get his family transported to another inner colony that was currently safe from the fighting. This had provided the necessary motivation for Anders to make sure that this shipment got through with no problems â€“ no matter what the cost.

Anders decided that trying to sleep was not going to work. He decided that he would get up and go into living room to check the latest vid-cast reports on the fighting. He got out of bed quietly making sure that he didn't disturb his wife. He took a look back at his wife of 10 years and hoped that they would have a chance to have another 10 years together. He made his way quietly through the hall and stopped to look in on his children. As he stood in the bedroom doorway, looking at his sleeping boys, he let out a sigh. The boys were both too young to understand what was happening as he looked over the toys and models of the UNSC spaceships and planes on their shelves. Anders shook his head and hoped that they would have a chance to grow up as he turned and made his way into the living room, reaching for the remote control to turn on the display screen on the wall. As he reached for the remote control, Anders was caught by surprise as he heard a noise. Before he could turn around he was hit on the back of the head, falling unconscious towards the floor.

The Spartan caught Anders's body before it hit the ground, so that there was no noise. The Spartan took his target away, making no noise. It was like he'd never even been there.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The darkness and fog started to clear as Anders came to and he became aware of the pain that was going through his body. His head ached and his shoulders, arms and wrists were burning and throbbing in pain. As he became more aware of his surroundings, he realized what his situation was and to say it wasn't very good was quite the understatement.

He found that his hands were bound together, over his head, and the plastic restraint tie was hanging from a very solid tree branch that had him dangling just over the ground that his feet just couldn't touch. He suddenly became aware of the night cold and found that he was stripped naked. Anders tried taking deep breaths as he regained more awareness and the reality of the situation he was facing sunk in. He found himself trying to keep back the panic at finding himself in such an exposed position. He tried to move to get some leverage, but all he was rewarded with for his efforts were the restraints cutting more into his wrists. He was caught off-guard as a voice called out of the darkness.

"You don't look very comfortableâ€|"

Anders turned his head to face the voice and watched as a huge robot came out of the darkness like a ghost not making a sound.

"You are Kevin Andersâ€| You are a resident of the town of Ravenna on

the planet New Constantinopleâ€| You own and run a small import/export businessâ€| You are marriedâ€| Wife's name is Helen and two childrenâ€| Josh age 7 and Trevor age 9â€| You are also a member of the insurrectionâ€|"

Anders just stared at the robot as it recited all his personal information.

Michael was recording the whole interrogation as he was nothing but thorough when he did these field interrogations. He knew you only got one chance in these situations and fortunately (or unfortunately) he had gained a lot of experience doing these sorts of interrogations.

"W-whoâ€| Who are you? W-what do you want?" Anders managed to say. His mouth felt dry as he tried to focus and not panic as he stared at the very scary and serious looking robot.

"Just answer the question and if you answer all my other questions you may get out of this aliveâ€|"

Michael lied to the prisoner as ONI's orders had been very explicit in this regards, but he needed Anders to believe he still had a chance.

"S-sure I'm Kevin Andersâ€| I own a businessâ€| But I'm no i-insurrectionistâ€| Y-you've made a mistakeâ€| It's just a misunderstandingâ€| P-pleaseâ€|" Anders pleaded.

Michael studied the prisoner. From his experience, he could see that it probably wouldn't take much work to get Anders to speak.

"I want the names and locations of your contacts on this planet." Michael said as he studied Anders's facial expressions.

"I-I don't know anythingâ€| Y-you're with ONI aren't you? T-there's been a mistakeâ€| It's just all a misunderstanding!" Anders continued pleading.

Michael could see that his prisoner was trying to stall and he let out a sigh.

"I had hoped we could do this fast and not get into the nasty and messy business, but you seem to not understand the situation you are inâ€|" Michael said as he pulled out his combat knife from his shoulder scabbard.

He could see Anders's eyes widened, "Oh Godâ€|. Pleaseâ€| Noâ€| Like I said you've got the wrong guy!" Anders's voice started to get higher with a shrill as he started to panic more at seeing the knife.

Michael could see that the prisoner was getting closer, but he needed to enforce the point. He reached into his equipment bag and pulled out a roll of duct tape. He quickly ripped a strip off and placed it across Anders's mouth.

"There's been no mistakeâ€| We know you've been shipping supplies to the Innies and laundering money for them from some of their criminal activities. Bank robberiesâ€| Drugs and weapons smugglingâ€| Human

smuggling and prostitutionâ€| What would your wife say about your activities?" Michael said still looking at Anders.

Michael pulled out a small blow torch and turned it on and got the flame to an intense blue color. Anders's eyes became huge as he started whimpering through the duct tape.

Anders could only watch helplessly as the evil looking robot took the blow torch and started heating up the knife. He could see the blade of the knife start to glow, that's when he lost control of his bladder.

Michael watched as Anders urinated himself from fear. He could see that his prisoner was very close to breaking. He knew what he had to do next. A part of his mind said that he could hold back and just mind-fuck the guy a little more, but there was no guarantee that the info he would provide would be reliable. He had to make the prisoner understand where the power was and that there was only one path. Michael had his combat knife blade glowing red from the heat. He grabbed one of Anders's feet and lifted the foot. He took the red hot blade and placed it flat against the bare bottom of Anders's foot. Michael could see Anders's eyes bulge even larger and could hear his muffled screams through his taped over mouth.

"You understand that this will continue until you co-operate?" Michael said as he saw the tears of pain run down Anders's face.

"If you refuse to answer my questions or if I feel what you tell me is not truthful. You will force me to pull more tools out of my equipment bagâ€|you don't want to know what I have in there." he said using a more menacing tone.

Michael applied the knife blade to Anders's other foot and he screamed and cried, this time losing control of his bowels.

Michael reached up and pulled the tape off Anders's mouth roughly. Anders whimpered and cried as his breathing was hard and ragged.

"P-please... I-if I tell you anythingâ€| They'll not only kill meâ€| They'll kill my familyâ€| If I talkâ€| You got to promise to protect my familyâ€| Get them off-world!" Anders said between his hard breathing.

"You're not really in a position to negotiate anythingâ€|" Michael replied.

"In my storage areasâ€| Suppliesâ€| Lots of suppliesâ€| For the Inniesâ€| Going to be shipped off-worldâ€|" Anders said between heavy sobs.

"I already know about the suppliesâ€|" Michael said as he checked the countdown timer on his helmet display, "â€|in about 12 minutes, the supplies and your business will be turned to ashes."

Anders's eyes widened, "Oh godâ€| No! Please if those supplies get destroyedâ€| I won't be able to get my wife and kids off-planetâ€| You know the Covenant are going to wipe-out everyoneâ€| P-pleaseâ€| Pleaseâ€|" he sobbed.

Michael could see that he had broken Anders. A part of Michael could feel for him and his desire to save his family, but ONI's orders were absolute.

"I-Iâ€|" Michael hesitated as he started to say the lie to get Anders to talk. He knew he could just say whatever Anders wanted to hear â€" he was a dead man either way. For some reason Michael knew that he had to do something.

\_If I can't protect and save one mother and her kidsâ€| What's the point of it all?\_

"I'll see what I can doâ€|" Michael finally replied.

"Swear it! Please swear that you'll get my family out when the time comes and I'll tell you everything!" Anders said as he now realized that he was dead man. If he didn't die here, the other insurrectionists would kill him shortly afterward. He realized that if he died here and his business and supplies were destroyed the insurrectionists would leave his family alone. If he tried to trick this "robot" it would just leave his family behind for the Covenant to kill. He had no choice but to hope and trust that this "robot" would save his family.

Michael could feel his conscience tear at him. He had his orders, but there was also his duty â€" a greater duty and oath. He looked at the broken, burned and bleeding man hanging there and he knew that this was all his fault. There was nothing he could do for this man as he was a declared enemy, but maybe there was something he could do, something he should do.

Anders looked at the robot as it stared at him with its gold tinted visor and he watched with awe as the robot reached up and appeared to remove its head. He realized that the "head" was in fact a helmet and he found himself looking into the face a young looking man.

\_He must be only in his mid-twentiesâ€| He sounded so much older\_, Anders thought almost laughing, but stopped as he looked at the young man's face. There was a nasty looking scar that ran down the left side of his face, but it was the young man's eyes that caught him. They were the most intense and powerful eyes that he had ever seen. There was power and strength there, along with pain and sadness.

Anders could only look helplessly as the young man said, "You tell me everythingâ€| I swear that I will protect and get your family off-planet if we can't hold off the Covenant."

Anders had been in business a long time and he had heard men swear oaths and promises and then break them without a second thought â€" he had been one of those men. This young man was something different, Anders thought that maybe he was trying to believe what he saw, but he could swear that this young man would move heaven and earth to keep his oath to protect his family or die trying.

Anders could only say weakly, "T-thank youâ€| T-thank you."

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael had stopped all video and audio recording before he took off his helmet. He knew that he was going off script and ONI would be furious, but where did his duty lay? He knew that if this had been a stand-up fight against the Innies that he would have no second thoughts or doubts, but this was different.

He took off his helmet to give Anders his oath as a Spartan and he planned to see it through and make sure that Anders's family got off planet.

\_Screw ONI on thisâ€| I'll get their information and destroy the suppliesâ€| They'll get what they wantâ€|\_

Michael put his helmet back on, turning back on all the video and audio recording devices. Anders spilled his guts. He gave names and locations not only for the cells on New Constantinople, but for anything he knew off-planet as well.

Anders was exhausted and drained after he had told the young man everything he knew about the insurrectionist groups that he was in contact with. He looked at the young man with his helmet back on. For some reason Anders felt at peace. He had known that there were risks and he could die fighting for the Innies, but knowing that his wife and kids had a chance. That brought some comfort in these final moments.

"Y-you'll make it quickâ€| W-won't you?" Anders asked calmly.

"Yesâ€| I'll make it quick." replied Michael.

Anders still in his calm state asked, "If you don't mind me askingâ€| What are you? Do you have a name?"

Michael stepped closer to Anders and spoke with sadness in his voice, "My name is Michaelâ€| I'm a Spartan."

Anders nodded as Michael quickly and deeply slashed across Anders's throat severing the carotid artery. Anders could only look as his life blood flowed out of his throat. Michael watched as Anders's eyes glazed over as blood pumped from the open wound. Anders passed quickly and all Michael could do was watch, he looked at the blood on his hands and armor.

Michael kept looking at Anders's lifeless eyes. It was then that he heard explosions in the distance. He turned towards the town of Ravenna and saw the glow of flames in the distance. He turned slowly back to the dead body hanging from the tree branch. He cut down the body and hid it in the brush as he didn't have time to bury the body. He had to make his way back to the pickup LZ.

Michael made it back to the LZ with time to spare before the Pelican arrived. As he sat and waited for his pickup ride, he reviewed all the events and his oath to the man he had tortured and killed. He looked down seeing Anders's blood still on his armored hands and arms.

Michael heard the engines of the approaching Pelican and knew that he would be back at base in a couple of hours, but he found himself wondering if he would ever get the blood off his handsâ€|

## 6. When do we go?

\*\*CHAPTER SIX:\*\*

\*\*When do we go?\*\*

\*\*New Constantinople

>June 19, 2536 â€“ 0932 Local Time<strong>

Vice-Admiral Danforth Whitcomb was at his desk reviewing the daily intelligence reports along with the troop and fleet status reports, on his display console. He didn't show any outward emotion as he scrolled through the electronic reports, but inside he was getting worried. He had managed to contain the Covenant invasion so far, but it was only a matter of time before they sent in massive reinforcements.

The Vice-Admiral knew if they could eliminate the foothold that the Covenant had on the planet, and if they could rebuild the planetary defense network then there was a chance to hold off the Covenant for now. There were a lot of ifs involved, but the alternative was something that gave him nightmares. The first objective was to maintain local space superiority and then hit the Covenant on the ground and that meant taking out the heavily shielded Command and Control (C&C) sites and supply depots. Intelligence reports had those installations protected by shields, so nukes fired from space by themselves wouldn't be able to destroy them. The only way that they could take out those Covenant installations would be by ground assault. Fortunately the Vice-Admiral had the resources to execute this kind of mission. He smiled to himself as he started working on the outline of his counter-attack plan.

Later at the daily briefing session, Whitcomb's staff was to say the least shocked as the Vice-Admiral outlined his attack plans, but they quickly recovered and started work on the offensive.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

\*\*UNSC Firebase Mitchell

>New Constantinople<br>June 20, 2536 â€“ 0815 Local Time\*\*

Michael had spent the last couple of days recovering from his mission in Ravenna. He felt emotionally drained and hadn't been sleeping well. He had forwarded ONI the treasure trove of information that Anders had provided. Michael waited for some sort of rebuke or questioning of his methods in his handling of the mission, but there had been no response back from ONI except for an acknowledgement of receipt of the collected intelligence.

Michael had reviewed the planetary news databases for information out of Ravenna. There was a report of the fire and destruction of Anders's business premises. The news reports said that investigators labeled the fire as "suspicious" and they wanted to interview Anders, but he was reported to be missing the same night leaving behind his wife and two sons. Michael sighed as he read that last part of the news report. He had hidden the body well enough that it wouldn't be found for quite a while and decomposition and wild animals would

probably hide most of the signs of the field interrogation. He had sanitized the area, so that there was nothing to trace back to ONI. Even the explosives used to take out the business were "clean". If local investigators did manage to find any evidence, the explosives would end up being traced to a shipment of military-grade explosives that had been stolen six months previously. In the end, the local authorities would probably write off the destruction of Anders's business and his disappearance/murder as a business deal gone bad. Anders's family would never know what had really happened to him.

Michael shook his head to get rid of the thoughts he was having. He was a Spartan and he had his mission and orders to follow. He still had to plan how he was going to keep his promise and get Anders's family off-planet. He didn't want to leave it until the last minute. He was trying to figure how he could use his ONI security clearances to get spots for the family on one of the evacuation transports, but he had made sure that ONI didn't get a whiff of what he was planning. He also had to be able to keep track and tabs on the family for when the time to get them off planet came.

Michael was going over different ideas and plans, with none of them looking promising, when his video com display chimed to signal an incoming video message. He quickly answered the video com, "Sierra-113 here."

The face of a man in his early thirties appeared on the screen, "Sierra-113â€| This is Commander James Wright. I am Vice-Admiral Whitcomb's chief of staff."

This immediately brought Michael to a higher state of attentiveness, "Yes, Commanderâ€| What can I do for you?"

"The Vice-Admiral wants to meet with you ASAP. He's going to be in the city of Antioch today for meetings. We've arranged to have a Pelican waiting for you on the landing pad. It's a three hour ride from your firebase, so the sooner you can get here the better." the Commander said in a tone that made it more of an order than a request.

"Yes, sirâ€| I'll be ready to go in 45 minutes. I just need to armor up and grab my equipmentâ€|" Michael replied.

The commander looked at him funny, "Sierra-113â€| I don't think you need to armor up for a meeting with the Vice-Admiral."

"Begging the sir's pardonâ€| I'm a Spartan and this is an active warzone. I would rather be safe than sorry, sir!" Michael replied using a tone saying that this was not up for discussion.

"Okayâ€| Just make sure you're on that bird in 45 minutesâ€|" the Commander said shaking his head slightly.

"Understood, sir! Sierra-113 out." Michael said as he watched the Commander cut the video com channel.

Michael made it down to the landing pad and boarded the Pelican in 42 minutes. As the Pelican crew prepared for lift-off and the long flight to Antioch, Michael settled himself into his seat and did a quick check of his suit's systems. He sat back and thought about why

he was being summoned by the Vice-Admiral.

\_Something must be going down nowâ€| At last! Here's my chanceâ€|\_

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael looked out the Pelican's open cargo door as it began its descent to land in Antioch. It was a fair size modern looking city and had a large population as one of the older cities on New Constantinople. As the dropship touched down on the landing pad, he could see an UNSC officer standing beside a Warthog outside the blast radius area of the Pelican's engines. Michael made his way out the Pelican's cargo door and started walking towards the officer and the Warthog. The officer started moving towards Michael at the same time and they met sort of half-way between the Pelican and Warthog.

The officer quickly came to attention in front of Michael, giving him a crisp salute. Michael studied the officer as he came to attention and returned the salute. The officer was young and nervous which caused Michael to smirk.

\_Here I am thinking of how young this soldier looks and I'm only 25 years old myselfâ€|with 19 years of serviceâ€|\_

The officer spoke somewhat nervously at being in the actual presence of a Spartan, "Sierra-113â€| I'm Lieutenant Marcus Prescottâ€| I'm to drive and escort you to Vice-Admiral Whitcomb."

"I take it that's our ride?" Michael said pointing at the Warthog.

"Yes, sir!" replied the young officer nervously.

"Take it easy Lieutenantâ€| First of all you can stop saluting me. I'm not an officerâ€|my field rank is Chief Petty Officer. I'm the one that should be saluting you, so just relax and take me to see the Admiral." Michael said in a calm voice trying to settle the young Lieutenant's nerves down.

"Yes, sirâ€|erâ€| I meanâ€| Yes, Chief."

"I would rather you just call me Sierra-113 or 113â€| I'm more comfortable with it." Michael said and he saw the young nervous Lieutenant nod in understanding.

Michael moved to get in the passenger side of the Warthog as Lieutenant Prescott got into the driver's seat of the Warthog and started up the engine of the vehicle. As soon as Prescott saw that the Spartan was seated he drove off heading for the location that the Vice-Admiral was using as a temporary headquarters for his visit to Antioch.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The drive to the Vice-Admiral's HQ was quick and uneventful. Michael studied the city and the layout of the areas they drove through. The Lieutenant was still nervous and stayed quiet and didn't engage him in any small talk which Michael was grateful for. He just wasn't that comfortable or familiar with all the small social nuances that people

did. Being "recruited" at age six and spending all your formative years in a military-structured training environment didn't teach you much on how to socialize with other people. The Spartans could socialize (if you could call it that) amongst themselves as they had that shared common experience of everything they had gone through. Michael even found that he had a hard time "socializing" with his brother and sister Spartans, he preferred being by himself. It was probably one of the biggest reasons he did a lot of missions solo. Michael could and would work within groups and with others when the mission required it, but there was something to be said for being by yourself. It was in those situations that he felt in complete control of his life â€" that he felt free.

They reached the building where Whitcomb's HQ was housed and the Lieutenant drove the Warthog into an underground vehicle bay. There was a lot of activity going on with officers talking and enlisted ranks working on vehicles and performing other tasks, but the noise and work seemed to subside and everyone watched as they saw a Spartan exit the Warthog and follow the Lieutenant to the building's elevator. Everyone started talking and murmuring amongst themselves. Things tended to happen whenever a Spartan was around.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael and Lieutenant Prescott exited the elevator on the top floor of the building. Again as Michael followed the Lieutenant, they drew stares from the staff that stopped working at the sight of the Spartan going past them. Michael and Prescott reached an outer office door and an officer came out the door to greet them. Michael recognized the officer as Commander Wright from the video conversation.

"Commanderâ€!" Michael said as he and the Lieutenant both came to attention.

The Commander nodded at both men, "At easeâ€! Thank you Lieutenant Prescott, I'll take it from here." Wright said dismissing the other officer.

"Yes, sir!" the young officer replied turning and quickly leaving.

"If you'll follow me Sierra-113, the Vice-Admiral is expecting you." Wright said as he turned and led the Spartan through the door into the office.

As Michael entered the office he took a quick note of his surroundings. The office was equipped with a desk and video terminal along with a large command table which could project information either on the table screen or in a 3D holographic format above the table. There were a couple of chairs and a small sofa off against another wall. He noted that the office was plain, but very efficient and functional. Vice-Admiral Danforth Whitcomb was sitting at his desk reviewing his electronic tablet. Michael's first impressions of the Vice-Admiral was of a man in his late-forties that was very striking and confident and was considered one of the best and brightest of the UNSC Navy. Michael was also aware of the Vice-Admiral's earlier work on the first prototypes of battle armor that eventually evolved and developed into the current Mark IV

MJOLNIR battle armor system. When they were close enough to the desk, both Michael and Commander Wright came to attention.

"Sirâ€| Spartan Sierra-113 is here as you requestedâ€|" Commander Wright said.

Whitcomb looked up from his tablet and looked over the Spartan. Michael could see that Vice-Admiral was trying to size him up.

"Thank you Commander. That will be all for now." Whitcomb said dismissing his chief of staff.

After the Commander had closed the door behind him, the Admiral stood and walked from behind his desk towards the Spartan. Michael was taken aback a bit as the Vice-Admiral held out his hand to the Spartan.

"Good to meet you Sierra-113. I'm glad we have you here with us." the Vice-Admiral said showing a genuine smile.

Michael quickly recovered and shook Whitcomb's hand, "Anything I can do to helpâ€| I will, sir!" he replied showing his own genuine enthusiasm.

"Excellent!" replied the Vice-Admiral.

The Vice-Admiral looked at the Spartan again trying to size up this soldier. Whitcomb had a high security clearance and had done work with ONI before on Black Projects, but the Spartan project was shrouded in the highest security and he'd only heard whispers about the project, but from what he'd heard and pieced together was enough to give him grey hairs. He could only look at this soldier and wonder if what had been done to him was worth the cost.

"Please, make yourself comfortable Sierra-113." the Vice-Admiral said offering a seat.

"Thank you, sir. But I prefer to stand." Michael replied, but as a compromise he removed his helmet.

The Vice-Admiral had heard stories of the Spartans and had used them in operations before, but he was still taken aback when he saw how young he looked. Whitcomb noted the fresh looking scar running down the left side of the Spartan's face and recalled the report of how the Spartan had done an orbital re-entry ridding on the outside of a Pelican. The other thing that struck the Vice-Admiral was the Spartan's eyes. They looked older than what the Spartan's physical age would suggest. Whitcomb could also see the strength and determination in there as well. The Vice-Admiral knew that he had the right person for the mission he had in mind.

"I have a mission that requires your particular skills. Would you be interested?" the Vice-Admiral asked.

Michael replied back enthusiastically, "Yes, sir!"

The Vice-Admiral arched an eyebrow at the Spartan's enthusiasm as he continued on, "I appreciate your enthusiasm, but you may want to temper it until you've heard what the mission is. I hope that this

won't interfere with your work for ONI."

Michael was taken aback by the Vice-Admiral's knowledge of what was supposed to be a classified mission on a "need to know" basis. Whitcomb couldn't help but smile as he could see that he'd put the Spartan off-balance.

"At ease son. There's nothing that happens in this system without me hearing or knowing about it. I have enough contacts in ONI that they gave me a heads up. I want you to understand that my primary mission is defending this system and planet and I will not tolerate any ONI 'distractions' that put that mission at risk. Do I make myself clear?" the Vice-Admiral said in a tone where there could be no misunderstanding.

"Crystal, sir!" Michael replied with a sense of relief to get that weight somewhat off his back.

The Vice-Admiral moved over to the command table with Michael following. The Vice-Admiral punched in some commands and a holographic 3D representation of New Constantinople appeared over the table. The majority of the planet was colored green except for a large red splotch on one section of the planet.

"As you can see, we've managed at great cost to contain the Covenant beachhead on this planet. Between the fleet and planetary defenses we've contained any advance, but it's only a matter of time before the Covenant brings in massive reinforcements. We need to remove their foothold before those reinforcements arrive." Whitcomb said outlining the current situation to the Spartan.

"Your main problem will be getting rid of the Covenant's command and control centers and supply depots. They'll be heavily shielded." Michael said outlining his take on the strategic situation.

"That's exactly the problem. If we try to go over the ground, it will take longer and we'll suffer heavy causalities. We need to hit hard and fast." the Vice-Admiral replied impressed with the Spartan's quick grasp of the situation.

"It sounds like you want to hit all those sites at the same time and the only way you're going to do that is through an orbital drop. That's very risky, sir."

Whitcomb couldn't help but smile as the Spartan picked up on his plan, "Yes, there is risk involved, but it's a calculated risk. Ground forces will make feint attacks to draw the Covenant's attention groundside. We'll then send the fleet in hard and fast to gain space superiority over the Covenant foothold if even for a temporary basis. Spartan Alpha Company will lead the main drop on the primary Covenant command and control center. The ODST 14th and 18th battalions will drop to take out the main supply depots. Your task will be to take out a secondary command and control center. We're going to be stretched thin on these missions. We can send in a marine fire team by Pelican once you've secured a LZ otherwise you're on your own for this mission. At a minimum if we can't destroy the objectives, we need to take down the shields and we can nuke them from orbit."

Whitcomb watched the Spartan as he studied the map and the objective

points.

"Can I get some equipment drops when I go in?" Michael said as he studied the holographic map and zoomed in on his objective area.

"Anything you need. You let us know and you've got it!" replied Whitcomb.

"When do we go?" Michael asked the Vice-Admiral.

"We're waiting on some more ships coming in from Reach and finishing repairs on our most damaged ships. We go at the earliest in ten daysâ€¦no later than 14 days. The longer we wait the harder it will be as you know."

"I have just two more requests Sir." Michael said.

"Like I said sonâ€¦ Anything you need just ask."

"I would like detailed topographical maps of my objective area to study."

"Done. What's the second request?" answered the Vice-Admiral.

"Uhâ€¦this is somewhat more difficult. I have three peopleâ€¦a woman and her two children that need to be evacuated off-planet." Michael said with some hesitation.

The Vice-Admiral's eyebrows arched in surprise at this request, "May I ask why these people are so important to be evacuated?"

"Sirâ€¦ It's related to my ONI missions. I'm under orders to not discuss them, but these people were important to a recent ONI investigation and they should be evacuated as soon as possible to a safe have." Michael replied somewhat uncomfortably as he was not used to asking favors, especially from flag rank officers and that he was also bending the truth.

"Do these people have anything to do with your trip to Ravenna several nights ago and the fire they had there?" the Vice-Admiral asked in a curious tone.

Michael was shocked that the Vice-Admiral had that much knowledge of ONI operations, but he quickly regained his composure, "Sir, like I said I'm under orders to not discuss my ONI missions, but I wouldn't ask for this favor if it wasn't importantâ€¦ I gave my oathâ€¦my word that I would make sure that these people would get off planet."

Vice-Admiral Whitcomb heaved an internal sigh. His contacts had given him a good idea of what ONI had wanted the Spartan to accomplish here on New Constantinople.

Damn it! I'm no fan of the Innies, but we have enough troubles fighting the Covenant that we have to waste a precious resource like a Spartan for assassination missions\_, Whitcomb thought furiously.

The Vice-Admiral finished his thoughts, \_Well I can't have my Spartan worrying about civilians and his oathâ€! Not at this time can I?\_

"Make sure you provide the names and details of the civilians to Commander Wright on your way out and I'll make sure that they are off on the next evacuation transport. You have my word on that!" Whitcomb said as he made eye contact with the Spartan to show his seriousness and commitment.

"Thank you, sir! I very much appreciate this! I'll make sure that target is turned to rubble!" Michael replied coming to attention and saluting the Vice-Admiral.

Vice-Admiral Whitcomb could see in the Spartan's eyes that he had gained his trust and commitment. Whitcomb only hoped that the Spartan was good enough and lucky enough to complete his mission and survive...

## 7. Into the valley of deathâ€!

\*\*CHAPTER SEVEN:\*\*

\*\*Into the valley of deathâ€!\*\*

\*\*UNSC Firebase Mitchell  
>New Constantinople<br>July 1, 2536 â€“ 0522 Local Time\*\*

The base was humming busily with activity even at this early time of the morning. The ground attack feint that was to draw the Covenant's attention had started twenty-four hours earlier. From the reports that Michael had heard and seen, the fighting was intense and brutal, but it appeared to be having the desired affect that the Admiral had planned for.

Michael was headed towards a Pelican that was going to take him up to orbit to rendezvous with the Paris-class heavy frigate UNSC Before The Dawn. The frigate was going to take him to his orbital insertion point over his objective and drop him along with other orbital drop pods loaded with extra equipment and ammo. Michael had also planned on a couple of "special-configured" drop pods to be dropped closer to the Covenant command center that were rigged to provide a nasty surprise for the Covenant and hopefully provide a distraction and cover for him.

As he boarded the Pelican and doubled checked his equipment, Michael felt the anticipation of both excitement and fear. He was no novice in combat, but this was his first time in a large scale operation against the Covenant and he actually had a slight momentary fear of failing in his duty and oath. He feared not being able to measure up to his brother and sister Spartans.

One thought passed briefly through his mind as the Pelican lifted off, he had heard from Commander Wright, Vice-Admiral Whitcomb's chief of staff, that one Catherine Anders and her two children had been evacuated two days earlier. The Commander had informed him that the civilians would be sent back first to Reach and then would be relocated to Earth. Wright noted that the woman had first been reluctant to leave as her husband had been reported missing, but he

had explained in person that the evacuation arrangements had already been made for her and her children. The woman finally packed up and the Commander had personally escorted the woman and her children to the evacuation transport.

Michael was thankful, but not really surprised that the Vice-Admiral had kept his word. Everything that he'd had read and heard about the Vice-Admiral had him as an honorable man and a straight-shooter. Michael had felt a huge burden lift off his shoulders that he'd been able to keep his word.

\_Whatever happens to me todayâ€| I'll be dropping cleanâ€| I've kept my wordâ€|\_

He pushed thoughts and memories of Anders away as he concentrated on what was required of him today. He went over in his head, once again, the layout of the objective area and where his and the other drop pods were going to land. The equipment drop pods were tagged with IFF transponders, so that he could identify and find them quickly on his helmet display.

As the Pelican achieved orbit, Michael looked forward and could see out the pilot's cockpit the huge gathering of UNSC warships. He couldn't help but feel awe at the numbers of ships and the amassed firepower that had been assembled for this operation, but in the back of his mind there stirred a thought.

\_Will it be enough against the Covenant?\_

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

On the bridge of the Valiant-class super-heavy cruiser UNSC Vauban, Vice-Admiral Danforth Whitcomb looked out the bridge observation window and then turned and looked at the sensor and navigation displays. He was having the exact same thoughts as the Spartan was having, \_Will it be enough?\_

The Vice-Admiral may have had some internal doubts, but he didn't show them to the bridge crew or in his tone as he relayed orders to the rest of the fleet.

The UNSC fleet was gathering into its battle groups. The majority of the fleet was on the other side of the planet from the Covenant's foothold, so they were masked from Covenant sensors by the planet. Another large battle group force led by the UNSC Presidio was gathered behind the moon that orbited New Constantinople and using that body to hide their presence.

Whitcomb looked at his tablet for the latest Intel reports. The ground fighting was having the desired effect. The Covenant ships were either in orbit over the battle areas or had entered the planet's atmosphere to provide support to their ground troops. He'd seen the casualty reports from his feint attack and they were brutal, but he needed to sell the attack to the Covenant. If the Covenant was able to gather their ships together as one force it would raise havoc with his fleet. Whitcomb knew that they could defeat the Covenant fleet, but he also knew that the cost to the UNSC would be horrendous. The key was to separate and isolate the Covenant ships, so that the UNSC could get overwhelming local superiority to concentrate its firepower.

Whitcomb still had the Orbital Defense Platforms (ODPs) and the picket ships of the fleet making moves against the Covenant. He still had to make the Covenant disperse and split their forces, but he was hoping to gain tactical surprise when he brought in his fleet. He was hoping that the Covenant's Intel had underestimated the total number of ships that he had at his disposal. He'd been careful husbanding his resources and concealing the true size of the fleet he had gathered in the system.

Fleet Intel had identified twenty-one Covenant ships in system and they were a mixed range of classes. The ones that worried the Vice-Admiral the most were the CCS-class battlecruisers. SIGINTEL and sensors had identified at least seven of the battlecruisers in system. The key would be to isolate those ships at the start of the battle and concentrate the fleet's firepower to take those ships out (best case scenario) or at least force them to withdraw.

The fleet battle plan was to use the super-heavy and heavy cruisers to engage the heavier Covenant ships first. The carriers would hold back to provide backup support with their MACs and send in Longsword fighters to support the heavies. The light cruisers, destroyers and frigates would hold off the smaller Covenant ships from supporting their heavies. The smaller ships would close-in and draw fire and try to suppress any Covenant gunboat strikes.

Vice-Admiral Whitcomb had one-hundred and twenty-two ships in his attack fleet not including fighters and even with his fleet obscenely outnumbering the Covenant ships, projected losses were estimated to run up to 50%. His plan to try and minimize his losses was to go in fast and force the Covenant back to clear the way for the designated ships to get over the orbital insertion points and drop the troops on their objectives.

Whitcomb swiped the screen on his tablet and he saw confirmation that all the designated units involved with the assault had shuttled up to their respective ships. He noted that Spartan Alpha Company and the ODST units would have the larger and more heavily defended targets to drop on, but that Spartan "Sierra-113" his ship would have the farthest gauntlet to run to get to its drop point.

Whitcomb closed his eyes and bowed his head for a moment as he said a quick prayer for everyone involved. If there was any other way of throwing back the Covenant invasion he would have taken it, but the Covenant held such a technological advantage in spaceships, energy weapons and shielding that the only thing that the UNSC could do was throw numbers at them and try and force ground battles to bleed the Covenant.

Will it be enough? Whitcomb thought again, It'll have to be! was his mind's response to the question.

Vice-Admiral Whitcomb turned to his chief of staff, "Commander Wright! Signal the fleet to commence the attack."

Commander Wright came to attention and saluted the Vice-Admiral, "Aye aye, sir!"

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The UNSC warships gathered behind New Constantinople and its moon received the attack order and moved out in their battle formations. The smaller warships formed up in front of the heavier warships to provide a protective screen. The carriers hung at the back to the battle formations and prepared to launch their fighters. The battle plan was to hit hard and fast with everything the UNSC had. If they could destroy all the Covenant warships that would be the best result, but at a minimum the fleet had to drive back the Covenant warships, so that those UNSC ships carrying the drop troops could get into position.

The Covenant detected the incoming human warships and they were at first confused. The feint attack had distracted the Covenant and caused them to hesitate as Vice-Admiral Whitcomb had intended. The Covenant knew that they had a technological advantage in space over the humans and thought that the humans would concentrate on giving battle on the planet surface as then the odds would tend to be somewhat more even between the Covenant and humans.

Those Covenant ships still in orbit turned to face the oncoming human ships. Communications were hurriedly sent out to the other Covenant ships that were further out in the system to come as fast as possible. Twelve Covenant ships in orbit turned to meet the human ships. Another four ships were moving at high speed for the planet to join up and lend their support. The Covenant scrambled to launch their Phantom gunships to help support and engage the human fleet. The five remaining Covenant ships were too low down to the planet's surface that they couldn't regain orbit in time to impact the battle immediately, but they tried to disengage to get back into orbit as they would be a distinct disadvantage if caught from above.

Even though the Covenant only had twelve ships to meet the initial human assault, seven of the ships were CCS-class battlecruisers. The fire power they could bring to bear would be tremendous. The remaining ships were a mix of SDV-class heavy corvettes and CPV-class heavy destroyers. Those smaller ships along with the Phantom gunboats moved to the front of the battlecruisers to provide a screen for the heavier Covenant ships. The Longswords swooped in to engage the gunboats and the battle commencedâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The human frigates and destroyers unleashed a barrage of MAC rounds from their main guns at the Covenant screening ships. The rounds left streaks of light flowing through space. Covenant shields flared from hits and the Covenant returned fire with their heavy plasma cannons and they added their own deathly colorful light to the surrounding space. Explosions rocked the UNSC ships as their armor tried to deflect the energy weapon hits. Ships took heavy damage, but those that could continue firing their main weapons did so and as those ships got closer they opened up with their Archer missile batteries. Autocannons mounted on the UNSC ships roared out a stream of fire to take out incoming Phantom gunboats as the gunboats and Longswords flew, maneuvering against each other and also trying to avoid getting caught in the fire from the heavier ships. Some human ships exploded from direct hits or after taking too many hits and suffered a breach in their engine rooms or weapon's magazine areasâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

"Sirâ€| We've lost our forward screen!" reported the first officer to Captain Henry Kwong on board the Presidio.

"Maintain course and keeping firing on those Battlecruisers!" Captain Kwong ordered as he viewed the battle out his bridge viewing area and on his video console. He saw the remains of his forward screen of destroyers and frigates. The ships were either destroyed or so heavily damaged that they were incapable of further movement or action and they drifted through space. This made the battle even more difficult as ships were not only trying to avoid fire, but floating hulks and other debris.

Kwong could only watch grimly as the heavy ships in his battle group continued its advance without its protective screen. The only saving grace was that he had exchanged his screen for the Covenant's screening ships.

"Comâ€| Contact the Carriers Georgia and Ontario and see if they have any Longswords left that they can launch to support us!" Kwong ordered as his ship shuddered under him from a plasma cannon hit.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Vice-Admiral Whitcomb watched his display console and looked out his bridge viewing area to watch the battle he planned unfold as his flagship shuddered from a glancing blow. He heard the Captain of the Vauban call out for a damage report, but the Vice-Admiral pushed those thoughts away as his responsibility was fighting the bigger battle and letting the Captain fight his ship.

Whitcomb watched status updates come in from the fleet, the Presidio's battle group was taking a pounding, but it was also dishing out heavy damage to the Covenant ships. It was unfortunate, but the Presidio's battle group force was facing off against five of the CCS-class battlecruisers. The Vice-Admiral watched with grim satisfaction as his ships destroyed and pushed back the Covenant fleet. Whitcomb had detached some of his task force to deal with the Covenant ships coming up from the surface of the planet.

The Vice-Admiral turned to his chief of staff, "What's the status of the drop?" he asked.

Commander Wright looked at his display status board, "ODST units started their drop two minutes agoâ€| All got away and they appear to be on targetâ€| Alpha Company is dropping in T-minus one minuteâ€| Sierra-113 is still on route and is scheduled to drop in T-minus nine minutesâ€|"

"Are we still providing cover for the Dawn?" the Vice-Admiral asked with some concern.

"The Longsword squadrons are either heavily engaged, returned to their carriers to rearm and refuel or destroyed. We have the Marathon-class cruisers Endeavor and Harmony and the Halcyon-class light cruisers Crimson Fire and Forlorn Hope along with their screen still covering the frigate. They're taking fire from a CCS-class battecruiser and the Covenant ships coming up from the planet's surface."

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Commander Xander Carstairs swore to himself as his ship the UNSC Before The Dawn shuddered from a hit.

"Damage report!" Carstairs ordered.

"Weapons control reports that we've lost our main gunâ€| Estimate 45 minutes to bring back on-line..." replied the damage control officer.

"Engine status!"

"Engine room reports greenâ€| Sir!" was the reply back.

"Status of drop pod bay?" Carstairs asked hoping for some more good news.

"Drop pod bay reports greenâ€| Our Spartan is all loaded and ready to go as soon as we enter the drop point area." replied another crewman.

"Continue on courseâ€| Move us behind the Endeavor for some cover... Can you kindly remind them that we need to get to the drop point in one pieceâ€|" Carstairs ordered.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The surviving Covenant ship commanders saw with shock and surprise as human ships launched a large number of orbital drop pods over the planet. They could only watch with helplessness as the drop pods screamed towards the surface of the planet and the areas that the Covenant had managed to occupy with great cost in troops and equipment. The Covenant ship commanders quickly noted that the drop pods were headed to areas that were supply depots, communication and command and control assets. They saw on their sensor display a group of ships headed towards the orbital area above one of their base installations. The surviving Covenant ships shifted to protect the space above that base. The Covenant was unaware that human intelligence had considered that base as a secondary command and control base, but it was in fact the primary communication and command center for Covenant forces on the planet. Covenant commanders contacted the remaining ships that were further out-system and ordered them to perform an emergency Slipspace jump to join the surviving ships to help defend the orbital spaceâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

"Slipspace rupture detected!" screamed one of the sensor technicians on board the UNSC Endeavor.

Captain Desta Khumalo could only look in horror as four Slipspace ruptures appeared only 80 kilometers off her port side. Out of the Slipspace points appeared an ORS-class heavy cruiser, a RCS-class armored cruiser and two SDV-class heavy corvettes.

"Order the Dawn to break formation and make a run for the drop point! All other ships engage and provide cover!" Captain Khumalo ordered

quickly as she saw that she was suddenly badly outgunned.

Commander Carstairs also got a warning about the Slipspace openings and saw in horror as four Covenant ships appeared suddenly off the port side of the UNSC battle formation. He heard the communication from Captain Khumalo aboard the Endeavor ordering him to break formation and make a run for it. Before he had a chance to acknowledge the order, he saw all four Covenant ships open fire. They concentrated their fire on the Endeavor and Carstairs could only watch in shock and horror as the Marathon-class cruiser got ripped apart and finally blowing up in a huge explosion.

"COLLISION ALARM!" Carstairs screamed as debris from the Endeavor hurtled towards his shipâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Vice-Admiral Whitcomb could only look on helplessly as the four Covenant ships tore into the battle formation escorting the heavy frigate towards its drop point.

"Damn it! Damn the Covenant and their tech edge!" Whitcomb swore to himself as he watched potential disaster unfold.

The Vice-Admiral turned to the communications officer, "Order the rest of our battle group to shift fire to engage those four new enemy ships! We've got to cover that frigate to the drop point!"

He heard the order go out and could see on his display console the remaining ships in his battle group shift to engage the new Covenant threat.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

"Damage Report!" Carstairs ordered over the noise of alarms, people shouting across the bridge.

"Sirâ€| We suffered multiple hitsâ€| Fires on decks 6â€| 7 and 9. We have hull breaches on decks 10â€| 11 and 12â€| We're venting airâ€| Weapons offline and Engine room reports damageâ€| They report that they need to take the engines off-line or the reactors will breach!" the damage control officer reported.

"Status of the drop bay?" Carstairs asked hoping that it was still intact otherwise this had all been for nothing.

"Still reporting green, sir." came the reply from the damage control officer.

Carstairs looked at his display console. For the moment the Covenant ships had redirected their fire at other UNSC ships, but it was only a matter of time before they turned their plasma cannons on his ship to finish him off. He grimly noted that one of the Covenant cruisers had taken position almost directly over the location where he was to release his drop pods. He knew the importance of this drop to the overall mission and he knew that he was faced with a hard choice.

Carstairs spoke in a calm quiet voice, "Helmâ€| Full Speed aheadâ€| Maintain courseâ€|"

The bridge of the frigate became deathly quiet except for the background sounds of the ship's alarms and other electronic noises.

"Inform the drop pod bay to be ready to release on my command!" the Commander added.

The bridge crew turned back to their duties and the crewman at the helm answered back "Aye aye, sir." as he laid in the frigate's course and approach vector.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The space around New Constantinople was a scene from hell as the battle continued. The few remaining Covenant ships gathered for a last stand and those UNSC ships still able to move and fight continued to advance and fire on the enemy. Among the streaks of MAC rounds being fired and the deadly flashes of plasma cannons returning fire was a lone frigate|heavily damaged and venting air continuing its run to its drop point|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

In the drop pod bay, Michael was cocooned within his orbital drop pod waiting for the signal to drop. He heard a warning buzzer signaling that the frigate was less than sixty seconds from the release point. He focused himself to prepare for the drop. He wasn't a novice at orbital insertions, but each drop was unique and each had its own set of circumstances and "challenges".

Michael felt the ship shudder violently from another hit. He had tapped into the frigate's com system and he knew that the ship had been heavily damaged. He had no information on the status of any of the other orbital insertions or the units since they had been dropped. The battlenet for the fleet seemed like a disorganized mess of ships reporting heavy damage and casualties, calling for fire to be diverted at Covenant ships. Some voices were cut-off in mid-sentence indicating either loss of communication from the speaker as a result of being either wounded or killed or from the ship being destroyed. Only the experienced soldier could hear through the chaos to understand and interpret the situation.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Commander Carstairs watched the sensor and display consoles as his ship continued its run to the drop point. The surviving UNSC ships continued firing and space was littered with debris and pieces of ships, both human and Covenant. His ship shuddered as the Covenant cruiser finally noticed the approaching frigate and shifted fire to engage the approaching human ship.

"Maintain course! Ready to drop!" Carstairs ordered as his ship heaved again from another hit.

Whitcomb watched from his flagship as he saw the frigate making its run. He could see the frigate venting air and trailing debris. He knew what the Commander of the frigate was planning.

"Concentrate fire on that cruiser!" he ordered in a desperate attempt

to try and provide some cover for the frigate's run.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Carstairs saw the Covenant heavy cruiser grow larger in his bridge observation window as they got closer. The heavy cruiser hadn't continued firing on his ship as the fire from the rest of the fleet had again distracted it. The Commander watched in professional fascination as he saw MAC rounds from the fleet slam into the cruiser's shields causing them to flare. He saw a light on his display console turn green â€“ they were finally in the drop zone.

"Execute Drop!" Carstairs ordered.

Michael heard another warning buzzer and saw a green light on his console. He only had a moment to prepare as his orbital drop pod shot like a rocket down through its launch tube.

The computer had been programed on the timing and order of the drop pod launch. Michael's pod was first followed by the ammo and supply pods and then last were the specially configured drop pods that were to land closer to the objective and provide a nasty surprise to the Covenant if they got to close to those pods.

Michael tried to relax and focus as he was pushed into his seat by the excessive g-forces as his drop pod screamed through space towards the planet's surface.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

"Sirâ€| Last pod is away!" a crewman called out.

Commander Carstairs breathed an inner sigh of relief that he and his ship had completed their mission. At that moment the frigate took another hit. This time it shook the ship so hard that it felt like something had picked up the ship and slammed it back down.

"Damage Report!" the Commander yelled as he regained his senses

"Multiple hull breaches! Fires spreading! Engine room is reporting that a reactor breach is in progress!" the damage control officer reported.

A thought passed through Carstairs's mind, \_I always wondered how it would endâ€\_|\_

The Commander looked calmly at his bridge crew and spoke in a quiet and calm voice, "Helmâ€| Aim us at that cruiser."

The crewman manning the helm station took a moment to realize what his Commander had ordered, but he didn't hesitate.

"Aye aye, sirâ€| Course setâ€|" replied the helm.

"Ask the Engine room to red-line the enginesâ€| Let's see how fast we can go inâ€|" Carstairs asked, again in that same quiet and calm voice.

"Aye, sir." came the reply back.

The bridge was quiet as the ship shuddered and strained as her engines increased power to begin its death run.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Vice-Admiral Whitcomb could only watch his video display console as a flood of mixed emotions and thoughts flowed through him. He felt pride, sadness, guilt and satisfaction as he watched the frigate UNSC Before The Dawn drive itself into the Covenant heavy cruiser causing both ships to blow up in a huge explosion taking out not only those two ship, but causing heavy damage to the nearby surviving Covenant ships.

As the explosions subsided and the surviving UNSC ships mopped up the remaining Covenant ships, eleven orbital drop pods streaked down towards the planet's surfaceâ€|

8. Damnâ€|that was close

\*\*CHAPTER EIGHT:\*\*

\*\*Damnâ€|that was close\*\*

\_ "Helljumper, helljumper, where you been? Feet first into hell then back again! When I die please bury me deep! Fix my MA5 down by my feet!"\_ â€" ODST Cadence.

Michael rode down on an express elevator to hell. The orbital drop pod shook roughly as it re-entered the planet's atmosphere. He could see through the pod's view window, the heat from re-entry melt away the outer protective layer of the drop pod. He checked the pod's sensor displays and his suit sensors and everything was looking good so far. He also had the IFF tags for the other pods coming in clean on his helmet display.

When the pods hit the 3000 feet mark, drag chutes automatically deployed to begin deceleration. The drop pods bounced hard as the chutes began to bleed off speed. They were only moments away from landing.

\_This is where the fun begins\_, Michael thought as felt the drop pod slowing and stabilizing. He could see out the pod's view window white bursts of light coming up from the ground in his direction. He immediately recognized this as fire from plasma gun turrets defending the installation. The chances of being hit at this distance were small, but chance and luck had their own impact on the battlefield. This was quickly demonstrated when the IFF tag of one of the ammo drop pods went dark on Michael's helmet display.

\_Damn it! Wellâ€| Better the ammo pod than me\_, he thought briefly as he focused and prepared for impact as the altimeter in the drop pod counted down the distance to landing. He could see his objective â€" the Covenant command and control center â€" growing bigger as he got closer to the ground. The installation was a fairly large sized structure with a two story base, in the middle of the base rose a

spire climbing at least 200 meters into the sky, by Michael's estimation. To top it off, Michael could see the shimmering energy shield that looked like it emanated from the top of the spire and flowed outward and downward to cover the whole installation.

Michael noted the installation's position and landmarks to orient himself to what he'd studied in the maps. His thoughts were interrupted as the drop pod's braking rockets fired and the pod slowed down even more dramatically. The braking rockets firing meant that the pod was only 50 meters from landing. Michael didn't have time to think as the pod hit the ground suddenly with a jarring thump, digging itself into the ground. The onboard computer quickly registered that the pod had landed and it automatically popped the pod door open allowing Michael to leap out into the battle.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael moved quickly finding cover behind some boulders near the drop pod. He checked his helmet display for the IFF tags for the remaining drop pods. He felt slightly satisfied that he hadn't lost any more pods and that they had all landed roughly in their targeted landing areas.

While behind cover, he did another quick check of his weapons. He was carrying his trusty MA5 assault rifle and for this mission had decided to carry a BR85 battle rifle as his secondary weapon. He had planned on this battle being a little more ranged "encounter" with the Covenant and the BR85 was his favorite weapon for reaching out and touching the enemy. He was also carrying the standard four fragmentation grenades along with a standard demolition "blastpak" charge, this would be used to take out the communications center in the Covenant installation.

Knowing that he would be encountering stiff resistance and he was limited in how much ammo he could carry, Michael had packed extra ammo for his assault and battle rifle in the four surviving ammo drop pods along with extra grenades and blastpak demo charges. He'd also packed a M19 rocket launcher with extra rockets in each pod to give him access to heavier firepower if he needed it. It looked like he would need the extra firepower as he could see Grunts, Jackals, Elites and some Brutes swarming around and out of the base.

\_That's a lot of angry Covenant for this being just a lowly secondary command and control base\_

Michael used his enhanced eyesight and helmet optics to look over and assess the installation's defenses. He noted the positions of the plasma gun turrets and the topography of the surrounding landscape, so he could move up using the cover of the land. He noted that there wasn't much in the way of tree cover as the area had already been scorched from earlier fighting when the Covenant first invaded, but there were low hills, rocks, boulders and piles of debris surrounding the base. He planned to use that to cover his approach.

Michael looked at his motion sensors on his helmet display â€" a large number of red hostile targets were moving towards him. He checked his MA5 one last time, out of reflex, that he had a full mag loaded.

Time to go, he thought as he made his move towards the base. As he moved quickly in a zig-zag pattern to make it more difficult for the enemy to target him, he saw a large group " at least fifteen Grunts " moving towards him. He noted that the majority of Grunts were waving plasma pistols, but there appeared to be a couple of Grunts carrying fuel rod launchers, which made them more dangerous.

Taking cover, quickly behind some rocks, Michael changed weapons exchanging his assault rifle for the battle rifle on his back. In one smooth movement he changed weapons and had the scope of the battle rifle up against his visor. The first target he zoomed in on was a Grunt with a fuel rod launcher. He fired a quick three round burst, seeing the head of the Grunt explode in a light blue spray of mist as the body fell to the ground. This caught the attention of the rest of the Grunts which caused them to immediately spread out looking for cover. Michael quickly picked out his next target, this time he lead his aim on another Grunt armed with a fuel rod launcher and fired another burst. This time the shots were aimed for center-mass. Two of the shots caught the Grunt in the torso, the third bullet hit the Grunt's breathing tank rupturing the tank. The rupture ignited the methane gas inside, that the Grunt's breathed, causing the tank to explode throwing the dead Grunt's body at least twelve feet into the air.

This carnage caused the remaining Grunts to panic which resulted in the survivors to turn around and run back towards the installation and safety. Michael didn't hesitate as he took careful aim and proceeded to thin out the group of retreating Grunts. He didn't even give it a second thought as he shot the retreating Grunts in the back " when you're fighting to protect your race from a genocidal horde of aliens all thoughts of mercy and fair play tend to be left at the door.

Michael kept killing the retreating Grunts until he saw the ammo indicator for his battle rifle hit zero. He reloaded the weapon and switched back to his assault rifle to move forward. His motion sensors displayed another swarm of red hostile targets approaching from his left side. As to further announce their presence, Covenant carbine shots started hitting the ground and rocks around him. His reflexes and training kicked in and he quickly dove for cover. He hit the ground and bounced back up into a kneeling position, his MA5 in firing position. He fired short bursts from his assault rifle back in the general direction of the shooters.

Michael was trying to draw a bead on the position of the shooters when he caught movement at a distance. Using his enhanced vision and helmet optics, he zoomed in on a group of Elites with Grunt support moving quickly towards one of the "specially configured" drop pods that had landed closer to the base. He noted other groups of Covenant troops moving up fast to the other four "special" drop pods. They appeared to be in a race to see which group would get to their drop pod first.

As a part of his assault plan, Michael had configured five drop pods to land close to the Covenant base. These pods were loaded full of explosives and were rigged up with motion sensors to detect any hostile targets that approached within 10 meters of the pod and then detonate. He had basically turned the drop pods into huge IEDs to kill, shred and maim anything within the 75 meter blast radius. He took a moment to enjoy the upcoming fireworks display as the Covenant

troops rushed in take the drop pods.

They're about to get a nasty surprise, he thought as he flashed a predatory smile inside his helmet.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The Covenant troops rushing towards the drop pods that had landed close to their base didn't think much of the fact that no human soldiers had exited to fight them yet. Among the majority of the Covenant races, especially the Sangheili (Elites) and Jiralhanae (Brutes), they had always considered the humans as a weak and strange species. If they refused to accept battle and cower inside their craft, then all the easier to kill or better yet capture and extract information from.

The Sangheili warrior leading the group, which was the closest to one of the drop pods, only thought of the glory he would achieve in battle by being the first to capture a human ahead of the other groups that were rushing towards the other four drop pods. The Sangheili grinned in anticipation as he got within 10 meters of the drop podâ€!

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael had a satisfied look on his face as he ducked behind his cover as the first of the "special" drop pods exploded. This was quickly followed by the other four drop pods exploding as Covenant troops got within range and tripped the motion sensors.

The huge explosions ripped through the Covenant troops in the kill zone. Michael looked up from cover and noting with satisfaction as the "special" drop pods had killed or severely wounded at least 95 Covenant soldiers by his estimation. Those Covenant troops that survived were stunned and in shock by the death and carnage caused by the explosions. The other troops that were fighting were caught by surprise by this attack and in that moment of hesitation, their fire either slackened or stopped as they looked towards the scenes of death.

That was Michael's cue and he didn't hesitate as he took advantage of the distraction and used his augmentations to full advantage. He sprinted forward at a blindingly fast speed towards the position where he'd located the Jackals that were pinning him down with fire. It was only a few seconds before the Jackals recovered, but it was too late as Michael closed up the range and got in their position, shredding the group of three Jackals with a long burst from his MA5. Before the bodies of the Jackals even hit the ground, he was moving again â€“ zigzagging towards the base.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The seconds felt like minutes to the Covenant troops that watched their fellow soldiers die at the hands of the human. The plasma turret gunners, located on the installation, finally recovered to bring their weapons to bear. They started firing at the human soldier sending out streaks of hot white plasma at him. The gunners cursed in frustration as they had a hard time aiming at the human target as he moved too fast and changed directions quickly, throwing their fire off.

Enkir 'Rolamee, a Sangheili Major who commanded the installation, watched with growing frustration from the open platform, on the second level of the base, as the Unggoy manning the plasma gun turrets vainly tried to hit the target. The Major was trying to keep his growing anger and frustration in control as he'd had a front seat view to watching nearly a third of his troops die from those booby-trapped drop pods.

\_It is one of those human demons that attacks us\_, 'Rolamee noted with hate and contempt as he tried to track the human as it moved from cover to cover avoiding and dodging the plasma fire. 'Rolamee turned to his faithful and trusted aide, "Minor 'Croluneeâ€| Take your troops and kill that human creature immediately!" barked the Major.

"Yes, Majorâ€| I will make it so!" 'Crolunee replied quickly turning to leave and gather his troops to fulfill his orders.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael noted that he was closing the distance to the installation. He'd managed (so far) to not get caught by any of the plasma fire from the gun turrets that were positioned on the second level of the Covenant base structure. As he caught a moment to rest, he quickly viewed the structure to study and analyze the layout and position of the defenses that he could see. He noted that there appeared to be two entrance ramps to the base on a rough North-South axis. Michael was currently located on the east side of the base and would still have to shift laterally as well as moving forward to make it around to one of those sides. The bad news, was that the last 75 meters surrounding the base was open ground with no cover whatsoever. If he couldn't neutralize or get rid of the gun turrets they were sure to ruin his day when he moved into that open ground.

As he looked over the structure, he picked up more movement on an open platform on the second level. It looked like that the Covenant was gathering another force to sortie out of the base to try and take him out. Michael switched to his battle rifle and used the scope to zoom in on one of the turret gunners. It was at extreme range, but he let loose with several bursts noting with satisfaction as the gunner slumped in the turret seat. He could see other Grunts moving quickly as an Elite directed Grunts to pull the body from the gunner's seat and quickly man the gun.

\_I'm going to need something heavierâ€| Plus could use some extra ammoâ€|\_

Michael checked his HUD for the IFF tag of the nearest ammo drop pod and he quickly planned his approach. He was going to have to move at least 100 meters back from his current position and over to his left another 75 meters. He turned his attention back to the installation and was greeted with Covenant troops swarming out from both base entrances of the base, moving towards his current position.

\_Seems like I finally managed to piss them off enough\_, Michael noted smirking as he saw the horde of Grunts, Brutes and Elites moving towards him.

Michael pulled a frag from his suit and armed it. With his augmented strength he could throw the grenade farther than a normal human and he took advantage of that by calculating his toss to land in front of the approaching group. As soon as he'd tossed the first grenade, he quickly pulled a second frag, armed it and tossed it to roughly land at the same place as the first one. As soon as he'd had tossed the second grenade, he started moving towards the ammo drop pod. He heard two explosions in succession, noting with satisfaction as the red hostile targets on his motion sensors slowed or stopped and also that there were less of them now.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

"Curse you demon!" 'Rolamee howled out as he watched two quick explosions tear into the front ranks of his attacking force causing them to stop to reorganize before continuing the advance. The Unggoy had been the ones to suffer from the explosion, but that was what they were there for. They were expendable and used to soak up the enemy's fire â€" no matter how many died.

The Major saw the human demon move away from the base, "Cowardâ€| Won't stand and fight and now moves away from usâ€|" he mumbled to himself, but then he noticed that human was moving towards another drop pod. The Major had assumed that the pod was rigged to explode like the other ones, but he watched as the human soldier opened the pod and quickly retrieved equipment.

"Concentrate your fire on that drop pod!" 'Rolamee yelled at his turret gunners as he realized that the pod was carrying equipment rather than death. The gunners quickly directed their fire on the drop pod, but the human had caught them off-guard. By the time the gunners recovered and put fire on the drop pod, the human demon had already gathered what it had needed and was moving away from the pod.

'Rolamee at least had some satisfaction as the drop pod went up in a huge explosion from the belated plasma fire, but the human demon was still out there.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael had reached the ammo drop pods and quickly retrieved spare ammo, grenades and a rocket launcher before the Covenant could react. Resupplied he moved quickly away from the drop pod as the Covenant started directing plasma fire at the position. He managed to put some distance between him and the pod and gained cover as the drop pod went up in a huge explosion showering him with debris, but causing no damage.

"Damnâ€|that was close." he murmured to himself.

Michael looked at his newly acquired weapon â€" a loaded M19 rocket launcher with four spare rockets. A small smile came to his face knowing that he now had the added firepower to go up against the Covenant.

He hefted the rocket launcher to his shoulder and popped out of his cover looking through the aiming reticle. He could see the plasma gunners, through the aiming reticle, as they swung their gun turrets to bring fire on his position. He put the crosshairs on the closest

turret and pulled the trigger.

Michael heard the rocket whoosh and felt the launcher shudder, but his strength minimized the recoil. He lowered the launcher slightly to watch the rocket streak towards its target. He felt a sense of extreme self-satisfaction as the rocket hit the Covenant gun turret dead on exploding, blowing apart the gun emplacement â€“ killing the Grunt gunner and several other Grunts that were standing beside the turret.

He glanced at his motion sensor display and noted that the Covenant troops rushing towards him were getting closer to his position. He turned towards the advancing enemy, making sure he had a clear field of fire.

\_Seems like overkillâ€| But what the hellâ€|\_

He used a Brute in the advancing troops as his aiming point. He led the target and anticipated where the Brute was going to be. He pulled the trigger.

As soon as the rocket roared out of the launcher, Michael quickly unshouldered the launcher and reloaded it with two of his spare rockets. He didn't see the second rocket explode, but he heard the explosion and saw on his motion sensor display that there were now considerably fewer advancing Covenant.

He popped up again with the reloaded rocket launcher, picking out another gun turret as his target. He pulled the trigger again.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The Sangheili Major howled in rage as he saw the human soldier fire rockets at one of his defending gun turrets and then almost immediately fire a second rocket at his attacking troops. The explosion took out a couple of Jiralhanae warriors and most of the other troops except for a few lucky Sangheili warriors.

'Rolamee was quickly trying to figure out how he was going to reorganize his defense forces when he saw a plume of smoke. Time froze as he realized with horror that he was standing next to a plasma gun turret and that a rocket was coming towards the turret. Time moved forward in what felt like slow motion as he saw the flame and smoke from the rocket streaking towards him. He could see the Unggoy turret gunner panic as he struggled to get out of the turret gunner's seat. 'Rolamee only had a moment to react as he dove away from the gun turret hoping he was out of the blast radius.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael saw the gun turret explode and fired off another rocket to take out another gun turret. The rocket had barely left the launcher when he dropped it and picked up his battle rifle. He had blown a hole in a coverage area of the gun turrets so that he could approach the base now through that opening.

His motion sensors showed enemy troops closing on his position and he saw that several Elites from the attacking group had survived. They

were now close enough that they had started firing with their plasma rifles. Their shots were off the mark and weren't getting any hits, but his suit sensors could register the heat from the near misses.

Michael took aim and fired off several bursts from his battle rifle. Elites took quite a bit to take down and as he concentrated fire on one of the Elites, out of the corner of his eye he caught something coming towards him through the air — it was a glowing object.

\_Shit!\_

Michael quickly realized what was coming and in one blindingly fast movement, he jumped to dive out of the way of the incoming plasma grenade. He just managed to avoid getting "stuck" by the grenade, but he felt the explosion shake his body and he was showered by debris. There was no hesitation or delay on his part as he recovered and quickly turned to face the direction that the grenade came from. He fired off several bursts from his weapon catching the Elite in the head, killing him instantly.

"Enough of this!" Michael muttered as he switched back to his MA5. Making sure he had a full mag, he rushed towards the two remaining Elites. There was about 50 meters separating him from the Elites as he fired a long burst from his assault rifle as he sprinted towards them covering the ground fast. The Elites returned fire with their plasma rifles. Michael's training and reflexes kicked in as he dodged the plasma bursts. A couple of shots hit glancing blows off his battle armor, but the reflective armor surface diminished their power and there was no serious damage other than burnt scorched marks where the plasma shots hit.

As he sprinted closer, he glanced at the ammo counter on his MA5 and saw it counting down fast as he concentrated his fire at one of the Elites. In a quick swift motion he pulled a frag grenade, armed it and tossed it at the Elites. He dove for cover as he tossed the grenade, recovering quickly and loading a fresh ammo mag into his assault rifle. The grenade went off throwing the two Elites to the ground, seriously wounded.

Michael came out of cover, continuing his forward push towards the installation. As he passed the two injured Elites that were lying on the ground, he fired a quick burst from his weapon into each of their heads, finishing them off without pausing or giving it a second thought. He had a clear approach now towards the closest entrance ramp to the installation.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

He paused at the entrance ramp as he did a quick check of his motion sensors. The sensors showed that there were still a lot of red hostile targets moving around inside, but his audio sensors had picked up the panicked voices of Grunts. A smirk came to his face as he picked up the panicked screams of, \_"The demon is here!"\_

Michael did an ammo check and changed magazines again to make sure he had a fresh one to enter the base. He did a quick ammo count — he had three spare mags for his MA5, plus he still had the battle rifle with a full loadout along with three grenades.

He took a moment visualize the layout of the Covenant base in his mind. The UNSC had been at war long enough with the Covenant to have a rather good idea how their base structures were laid out. The first two levels would be equipment, storage and power areas. The communication and shield control areas, which were his targets, would be located at the top of the control spire. To access those areas, he would have to make his way to the second level and then ride up a gravity lift up the center of the spire to the top. Michael took a deep breath to relax and focus himself, he moved up the ramp into the base.

As he moved carefully through the base he only encountered light resistance. Most of the Grunts were panicking and those that did stand to fight were quickly dealt with. Michael did encounter a few hardcore Grunt defenders who charged at him holding live plasma grenades. He quickly dispatched those "suicide bombers" without suffering any damage or injury.

It felt as if hours had passed, but he knew it was only minutes since he entered the installation as he finally reached the gravity lift platform located at the bottom of the spire on the second level. He checked his motion sensors â€“ they appeared clear for now.

He gazed upwards, the streaming light of the gravity lift reflecting off his visor as it flowed up the spire like a waterfall.

#### \_Who Dares Winsâ€|\_

There was no hesitation as he stepped into the light flow of the gravity lift. Michael felt himself lift off the ground, flying upwards through the stream of light towards the top of the spire. It was only going to take seconds to get to the top of the spire. As he traveled upwards, Michael kept one eye on his motion sensors and as he got to the top â€“ red hostile targets popped up on his display.

As he reached the top of the spire, the gravity lift propelled him onto the platform and into a group of Gruntsâ€!

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael exited the gravity lift landing among the startled Grunts. He counted at least a dozen Grunts, but he didn't hesitate as his reflexes and training took over. He held down the trigger on his MA5, spraying the platform area with bullets, either killing the Grunts or causing them to scream and run away in confusion. He maintained his fire, changing mags on the fly, as he moved. Only a couple of Grunts managed to escape the platform area running further into the spire. Michael followed keeping one eye on his motion sensors.

\_I'm closeâ€| I would hate to blow it now after getting this far\_, he thought as he took a quick deep breath to maintain his focus and concentration.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

'Rolamee was on the spire platform. After barely escaping the rocket taking out the gun turret next to where he had been standing, he had reasoned out that this human demon was going to head toward the

shield control and communications areas of the base. He decided to make his stand there. He would wait for this Spartan to come to him and he would then have his revenge.

The Major had watched and monitored as the human entered his base and decimated his troops. The Sangheili's anger rose at the thought of a single human killing all his troops and destroying this important base. He made the decision to wait in the communications area as he reasoned this would be the human's primary target. It wasn't long before he heard the distinct sound of human weapon's fire and the yelling and screams of his last remaining Unggoy soldiers.

\_The demon will be here soonâ€|and I will have my revenge\_, 'Rolamee thought trying to contain his anger and maintain his focus. He could hear sounds of fighting getting closer and he engaged his active camouflage system making himself invisible. The Sangheili tightly gripped the hilt of his plasma sword as his finger caressed the activation button in anticipation of activating the sword and plunging into the Spartan's body.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael moved carefully around the spire platform. He was tracking down the last Covenant defenders, but something was bothering him. A thought nagged at the back of his mind, \_I thought I had three red hostile targets on my motion sensors and now there are only twoâ€|\_

He tracked down the last two Grunts, killing them quickly as they fired at him with their plasma guns in a futile attempt to stop him. Michael took a few more glancing shots off his armor, but again the reflective coating on his battle armor provided more than enough protection. With all opposition eliminated, he made his way to the communications room to plant the blastpak charge, he was carrying, to destroy the equipment in there.

He located the communications room, pausing just outside the entrance. He checked his motion sensors and listened with his audio sensors. He didn't detect any threats, but something was still bothering him.

\_Something doesn't feel rightâ€|\_

He tried to focus and control this feeling that was starting to scream in the back of his mind, but with no visible threats he had to move into the room to take out communications. He found himself uncharacteristically hesitating, but he overcame it and moved slowly and quietly into the communications room. He spun in each direction, swinging his MA5 to deal with any potential threat, but there was nothing " except for the background hum of the equipment operating.

Michael slowly moved further into the room with every one of his senses running in overdrive. He moved into the center of the room, getting closer to the main communications control panel located opposite of the entrance.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

\_Come closer demonâ€| Soon your time will end...\_

'Rolamee could feel his blood burning in anticipation of killing this human demon. He waited until the human was closer to the communications panel. When he felt that he had the right position for a killing blow, the Major made his move " going from the side wall on the right hand side of the human. He planned to sweep around and come up behind this demon.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

As Michael got closer to the communications panel, he noticed a funny signal on his motion sensors.

\_There! Something on my motion sensors! Not a solid contact! Something very close! Almost like an echo! something familiar about it! almost like there was a ghost in here! SHIT!\_

His eyes went wide as the realization struck home as he realized what was happening. His reflexes kicked in as he reacted.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

'Rolamee swooped in behind his human prey activating his plasma sword. The plasma sword made its eerie electric crackling sound as the plasma energized into its deadly form. The Major had a predatory smile on his face when he swung his plasma sword in at the human demon. He had anticipated at slicing the human in half, but the smile on the major's face turned to shock as this human demon reacted with blinding speed when he turned and stepped into the major's killing blow and used his weapon to deflect the major's arm.

'Rolamee tried to recover and a brief thought flashed through his head as he saw the human's weapon fly across the communications room from deflecting his plasma sword blow, \_The demon is defenseless now! Time to fin!"\_

The Major never had a chance to finish his thought as the human spun his body in an impossible blinding fast move, at the same time drawing a knife from a scabbard on his left shoulder. The move finished with the human demon driving the knife into the side of the 'Rolamee's head, killing him instantly.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael pulled his combat knife out of the Elite's head once he was sure the creature was dead. The body fell to the floor with a heavy thud with him standing over it. He had reacted on pure instinct and adrenaline and it was only luck and his Spartan augmented reflexes that allowed him to survive this close encounter with this Elite. He found himself still keyed up, he quickly checked the communications room in case there were anymore "ghosts".

It took a long moment, but once he realized that this was the last base defender, he took a deep breath and put his combat knife back into his shoulder scabbard.

\_Damn! Lucky on that one!\_

Michael breathed another sigh of relief and retrieved his MA5. He

didn't waste any further time as he planted the blastpak charge on the main communications panel. Setting it for a 45 second delay, he quickly exited the room once he activated the timer. He made his way over to the shield control room, entering the room as a loud explosion went off causing the spire to shake and shudder. He quickly located the main control panel and deactivated the base's shield.

He looked out the control room's window, the energy shield was shimmering and then it lost its integrity, dissipating and then disappeared. In seconds the shield around the base was down. Michael turned to exit the control room. Stopping at the entrance, he pulled two of his grenades, armed them and tossed them towards the main shield control panel. He ducked around the corner and heard two satisfying explosions causing the spire to slightly shudder again.

With the installation secured and communications and shield down, Michael opened a communications channel to report on his mission status, "Commandâ€| This is Sierra-113â€| SITREPâ€| Objective is neutralizedâ€| I repeat the objective is neutralized."

He had to wait a long moment, but he heard static over the communications channel followed by a voice, "Sierra-113â€| This is commandâ€| Confirmed objective achievedâ€| We have three inbound Pelicans carrying Marines to reinforce and secure the areaâ€| ETAâ€| 32 minutes."

"Roger that commandâ€| Will hold on-site until reinforcements arriveâ€| I will mark LZ with orange smokeâ€| Repeat orange smokeâ€| Copy that command?"

"Copy that Sierra-113â€| Confirm orange smokeâ€|" replied the voice on the other end of the communications channel. There was a static filled pause, then the voice spoke again, "Sierra-113â€| Excellent work."

"Thanks commandâ€| Sierra-113 out." Michael replied as he moved to head back down to the ground level to maintain security over his newly won objective and wait for the Marine reinforcements to fly in.

## 9. Do your dutyâ€| Spartan!

\*\*CHAPTER NINE:\*\*

\*\*Do your dutyâ€| Spartan!\*\*

\*\*UNSC Firebase Mitchell

>New Constantinople<br>August 11, 2536 â€" 0530 Local Time\*\*

The dream was disturbing as it always wasâ€|\_ Covenant ships filled the sky and they were firing their plasma guns making the sky seem to catch on fireâ€| People were crying and screaming and Michael could only watch helplessly filled with rageâ€| He heard a voice taunting himâ€| "Who are you?" He turned and he was greeted by the sight of the body of Kevin Anders hanging from a treeâ€| The eyes of the man that he had "interrogated" bore right into his soul and the man asked again "Who are you?" which was strange as Anders shouldn't have been able to speak with his throat cutâ€| Michael could only stand frozen

as he watched the Covenant devastate everything and burn the world around himâ€|. He could see the flames coming closer and he could feel the heat from the flames. He looked and suddenly realized that he no longer had his armor onâ€|. He could see and feel the skin on his arms start to blister and burn as the pain grewâ€|\_

Michael awoke with a start and sat up in his bunk. He rubbed his face with his hand. He could feel the sweat covering his face and body as he turned and sat on the edge of his bunk.

No point trying to go back to sleepâ€| Was going to get up in 30 minutes anyways\_, he thought somewhat glumly.

He had been back at the firebase for two weeks now. After he had secured the Covenant Command base, he had waited for the reinforcements to arrive via Pelican. They had arrived just in time to beat off a major Covenant counter-attack. They had then spent the next two days beating off continued attacks. The Covenant had managed to prevent further UNSC reinforcements from flying in during that time and the fighting had been hard and bloody, especially the last day as the Covenant were getting more desperate to retake their base.

That last day the fighting had degenerated into hand to hand combat as the human forces were running out of ammo and were forced to scrounge Covenant weapons and ammo to continue fighting. Michael had fought like a madman using a Covenant plasma sword to beat back the last attacking waves. The human forces had finally broken the Covenant's will and were able to bring in further reinforcements.

Michael had heard that the SPARTAN-III Alpha Company had secured their objective with minor injuries. The ODST units dropped were ultimately able to secure their objectives, but they had suffered heavy casualties in doing so. Now that UNSC forces had regained space superiority and had removed the Covenant Command & Control and supply bases it was only a matter of time before the Covenant foothold on New Constantinople was eliminatedâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Even with the Covenant command and supply infrastructure in disarray, this seemed to only make the remaining Covenant forces fight even harder and with more desperation, especially the Elites and Brutes. Heavy fighting raged within and around the Covenant's foothold on the planet. Michael had spent the next three weeks being shuttled from one hot spot to another to provide support in the desperate fighting. During this time, he had felt that he was where he needed to be and doing what he was meant for â€" at least that was what he told himself.

In the third week, the fighting reached more desperate and vicious levels as the Covenant had managed to scrap together a large attack force supported by their remaining Wraiths and Banshees to attack a point on the perimeter they felt was the weakest. Where the Covenant was going to breakout to was unknown. Maybe they knew that they were doomed and just wanted to kill as many humans as possible. For the Elites there was no thought of surrender, only the glorious honor that came from battle with a hated enemy.

Michael had arrived on a Pelican with Marine reinforcements as the Covenant attack hit the perimeter. He knew that this fight was going to be a violent affair at level he hadn't experienced before â€“ the Pelican he had arrived on blew up from a direct plasma hit just moments after he and the Marines he came in with had exited. Michael was immediately engaged in battle as waves of Grunts threw themselves at the human defense lines. Most of the Grunts came in as suicide bombers carrying plasma grenades detonating themselves if they had managed to survive the intense and highly motivated human defensive fire.

Casualties among both human and Covenant forces were horrendous. Michael found himself at the center of the battle moving from one sector of the defense line to another sector when it was threatened with being overrun. The sky was filled with the arching red plasma bolts from Wraiths as Banshees howled through the sky as they added their shots to the plasma created hell. The UNSC responded back with artillery strikes and Scorpion tanks firing rounds back â€“ missiles filled the sky seeking out targets.

Michael had been swallowed up in the fighting. There was no time to think only to move and fire at whatever Covenant target appeared, then quickly reload, fire again and then move again. Those Marines that survived the battle would later tell stories about how a Spartan would appear seemingly out of nowhere and beat back a Covenant attack and then disappear.

The whole battle took on an even more nightmarish scene from hell as streaks of light came screaming through the atmosphere as UNSC ships in orbit joined in and fired MAC rounds behind the battle lines to take out and disrupt the follow up waves of Covenant troops moving towards the battle.

The Covenant made one final frantic push with what troops and equipment they had left and they were met by the desperate defense of the human defenders. Michael moved like a god across the battlefield firing and engaging the most dangerous targets.

He took on Elites, Brutes and Hunters. They all tried to kill him and each time he survived while they died. He could feel his blood and soul scream as he embraced the death and destruction surrounding him. He was caught up in the whirlwind and no one could stand against him â€“ that was almost his undoing.

Michael never saw the Banshee that was screaming through the air towards him when it got hit by a human missile on its starboard wing causing its Elite pilot to lose control of his ship and have it start spinning towards the ground. It was only by luck and his instincts, that at the very last moment, that he saw the fatally damaged Banshee spinning towards him. He started to dive out of the way when the Banshee hit the ground going off in a huge explosion. The blast and shock wave tossed him like a ragdoll throwing him hard into the side of the burnt out remains of a destroyed Wraith.

If it had been a normal human they would have been crushed, but between Michael's armor and augmentation he was able to survive. He lay stunned on the ground for a few moments, finally moving slowly making sure that his arms and legs responded. He got up groggily trying to focus, but his vision was blurred and his helmet display showed yellow and red damage warnings to his armor systems.

Michael staggered back to the human defense lines. He still had enough sense to avoid the heavy fighting as he realized that his fighting ability was impaired. He finally made it to a defense position where he added his fire to the Marines hold up there. The Marines were unexpectedly happy to have a Spartan (even an injured one) in their position adding his support.

After what seemed like hours, the battle finally petered out as those few remaining Covenant survivors retreated to hold up and continue their fight for another day. The Marines along the defense line were suddenly met by the silence that descended along the battlefield and it was almost like a simultaneous sigh of relief was exhaled by those surviving human defenders as they realized that the battle was over. A lot of the Marines collapsed in exhaustion in their defensive positions, but orders were quickly given for patrols to be sent out to patrol and police the battlefield in case the Covenant made any other breakout attempts.

Michael was in his defensive position when he was struck by the silence and absence of weapons fire. He couldn't even begin to describe what he was feeling. He had been filled with this tremendous emotional feeling and now there was nothing. When he tried to stand up, he suddenly didn't have any strength in his legs. His blurry vision got worse and his head started aching in pain.

The Marines in the defensive position were shocked as they saw the Spartan try to stand up and then collapse. It took them a long moment to shake off their shock, finally medics and a heavy-lift team were called in to help the fallen Spartanâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael spent three days in a medical bay under observation. He was diagnosed with having suffered an extreme concussion from the effects of the Banshee explosion. He balked at having to stay so long in the hospital, but finally resigned himself to his fate as orders came down directly from Vice-Admiral Whitcomb ordering him to rest and co-operate with the medical staff.

Michael found himself feeling agitated by the third day, when the medical staff finally gave him a clean bill of health. He was still suffering from minor headaches and slightly blurred vision, but he didn't mention that to the medical staff lest they held on to him longer.

He returned to the firebase and was expecting to receive immediate orders to deploy back into the battle, but he was surprised to receive orders to stand by. During this time Michael reviewed the battle records from his orbital insertion and caught up on the latest battle reports.

The Covenant perimeter on New Constantinople was being reduced. There was still fighting going on, but the intensity was not as fierce as the earlier fighting. The projections were that the fighting would continue for another ten to fourteen days before the Covenant forces completely collapsed and were eliminated â€" there was no talk of offering terms for surrender.

The UNSC was trumpeting the success of Vice-Admiral Whitcomb's plan

against the Covenant on all the planetary news feeds. The news reports that the civilians saw spoke of the tremendous sacrifice by the men and women of the UNSC armed forces, but the broadcasts didn't give any specific details as to what the actual cost had been. Michael was able to see the casualty lists and they were horrendous. The Navy had lost nearly forty-five percent of their ships in battle with the Covenant ships in orbit around New Constantinople.

The UNSC was quickly sending reinforcements to rebuild the fleet in the system and Vice-Admiral Whitcomb was working his forces like a task master to quickly repair damaged ships and at the same time rebuild the damaged planetary defense network. While others celebrated the demise of the Covenant forces on the planet, Whitcomb worked like a madman as he expected the enemy to return.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael spent that first week at the firebase trying to relax, but he found himself anxious and reacting to any sudden noise or movement. By the end of the week, his vision was returning to normal, his headaches were going away and he was able to sleep somewhat normally at night, at least until he got a video call — the call came from ONI.

The ONI officer informed Michael that they had reviewed all the intel that he had provided them from his interrogation of Anders and they had been following up on the off-planet leads with success. What the ONI officer wanted to know was why Michael had not been following up on the other leads on the other separatist cells on the planet.

Michael had to explain slowly and carefully that he had been somewhat busy helping to defend the planet from a Covenant invasion and had not been able to follow up on any further leads. He tried to hide his revulsion and disgust as the ONI officer dismissed his explanation and ordering Michael to follow up immediately or as the ONI officer had put it — "You're a Spartan and you know your duty and allegiance to the UNSC! So do what we've made you to do!"

Michael bit back his response responding with a crisp salute and the obligatory "Yes, sir!" as the video call ended. His nightmares started again that night—

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael got out of his bunk making his way to the bathroom. He stood bent over the sink with his hands holding on each side. He turned on the tap and ran his hands under the cool water and then splashed some water on his face. He looked up and he saw himself in the bathroom mirror. He took a long hard look at himself in the mirror.

"Who am I? What am I?" Michael said out loud looking at himself in the mirror. He stared into the eyes of his reflection as he tried to come to grips with his ONI order. Images from the battles against the Covenant flashed through his mind. As the images replayed in his mind, he could feel his heart start to beat faster and his pulse quicken. He realized that he'd felt so alive and filled with purpose on the battlefield.

\_That is where you belong\_, he thought as he stared at himself in the mirror.

He was caught by surprise as another thought flashed in reply, \_Noâ€¢! You haven't found where you belongâ€¢ yet\_.

Michael was shaking his head as he left the bathroom trying to figure out where that thought had come from.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

After getting dressed and having breakfast, Michael made his way to the firebase's operations center. Using his ONI security clearances, he quickly obtained access to a secure computer terminal. He quickly retrieved and brought up all the information he had gathered from his "talk" with Anders.

Reviewing the information he gathered, he cross-referenced it with the information package ONI had provided him about the Innies when he was assigned this mission. Going through all the intel, he could see that he had some good solid leads that would require follow up. He just wanted to double-check and maybe even triple-check everything to make sure that the intel was solid, before he started chasing these Innies down. He stopped for a moment as he realized that he was sub-consciously dragging his feet. He found a sickening feeling building in his stomach at the thought of having to do anymore field interrogations against more humans.

Michael let out a sigh as he realized that when he was fighting the Covenant it was all so much more "simpler and cleaner" than dealing with the ugliness of an insurgency and the tactics that were called for.

He tried to shake himself of these thoughts to refocus his attention. A smirk formed on his face as he recalled how CPO Mendez would have chewed him out, if he'd seen him showing all these thoughts and doubts.

Michael could almost hear Mendez yelling, \_Get your head out of your ass and do your dutyâ€¢ Spartan!\_

The smirk started to grow into a smile, but faded as he recalled those memories of those early years of training. He let out another sigh as he found himself wishing that he had someone like Mendezâ€¢ Halsey or even Dr. Reeves to talk to right now and share what he was feeling.

\_Maybe John has the right ideaâ€¢ Maybe it's better to just disconnect yourself from the world around youâ€¢ It might make it easier to focus and concentrate on what I need to doâ€¢\_

Michael pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind as he turned his attention back to the computer terminal. He knew he would have to go out again. It didn't matter what he felt. He had his orders and his duty to perform. A fleeting thought passed through his head that maybe he could go to Whitcomb and ask the Vice-Admiral to find another mission for him to do, but he quickly shot down that idea as his training kicked in â€" that is not what a Spartan did. Michael had his marching orders and it was time to march.

The intel provided a couple of leads to separatist cells on the planet. One lead was in the small town of Brusa located in the southern hemisphere of the planet. It appeared that most of the separatist support on New Constantinople was located in the smaller towns and outlying areas â€“ away for the prying eyes of UNSC and ONI surveillance.

Anders's information implicated a resident of Bursa, a man named Barton Jackson. Michael accessed all police, military and civilian databases to bring up all the known information and the whereabouts of this Jackson. From the information he could pull up, it appeared that Michael's latest target had a somewhat shady and colorful record. Even though records pointed to Jackson being a resident of Brusa, there was no fixed address for him â€“ he was trying to stay off the grid. Michael went through the records again and found an address listing for a known associate of Jackson's who also lived in Brusa.

Michael let out another sigh as he could start to see how this was going to play out. This was going to be another messy mission, but ONI didn't seem to care about the mess or cost, they only cared about the results. He knew that he would need to "talk" to Jackson's associate first to find Jackson. Then, if the associate was most forthcoming in giving up Jackson's location, then he would have another friendly chat with Jackson himself. From the intel, this Jackson acted as a courier and liaison between some of the different Innies cells. If Michael was able to track him down, he would be a good source of information to locate and track down the cells. Once the cells had been identified and located, they could be taken out and the leadership structure removed.

Michael reviewed the material, one more time, committing the important details to memory before closing the data file. He then opened a secure communications channel to the firebase's operations officer.

"Captain Moren hereâ€|" responded the officer as he answered the video call.

"Captain, This is Sierra-113â€|" I need to requisition a Pelican and her crew for a missionâ€|" Destination is on a need to know basis onlyâ€|" Michael replied.

He saw the Captain's eyebrows slightly arch and look unsure at this request, "Understood Sierra-113. I will need your authorization code and security clearance to confirm." replied the operations officer.

"Understood Captainâ€|" Michael replied as he typed in the authorization code along with his security clearance code into the terminal. He didn't display any outward emotion as he saw the operations officer's eyes widen at seeing the ONI clearance code granting Michael access to any resources and equipment he needed.

"Y-yes, sir! I can have a Pelican available and ready. When do you need the Pelican and her crew ready for?" the Captain replied trying and failing to hide the nervousness in his voice.

Michael had to suppress a smirk as the operations officer actually

outranked him, but he didn't have the time to explain the ranking situation.

"I'll need the ship and crew ready to go tomorrowâ€|" Michael replied pausing as he did some quick calculations as to how long it would take the dropship to fly from the firebase to Brusa. He needed to work in the dark and the flight would take at least six hours, "â€|let the crew know that we'll go wheels up at 1530 hours." Michael said as he finished his calculations and started to put together his operational plan for this mission in his head.

"Yes, sir!" again replied the operations officer. The Captain seemed to hesitate and then spoke again with the nervousness still in his voice as he knew that asking too many questions about ONI missions could have a negative impact on your career and potentially on your health and well-being, "Sirâ€| if you don't mind me inquiring. How long will you be requiring the Pelican and her crew?"

Michael took a moment and gave it some thought. There were a lot of variables at work on this mission and some unknowns that could have an impact.

\_Better play it on the safe sideâ€|\_

"Tell the crew to pack for a three day missionâ€| just in case. They'll be living in the Pelican while on station." Michael replied feeling that would give him enough time to track down Barton Jackson.

"Understood, sir! Will you need anything else?"

"No, Captain. That will be all. Thank you." Michael answered terminating the video call.

He punched in commands to the terminal again and brought up maps along with the layout of Brusa. He had the address of Jackson's associate and he used that information to plan his LZ and approach into the town. A small frown appeared on his face as he saw that the associate's location was in the central area of the town. This presented problems on how he would approach and stay hidden and unseen by the civilian population.

It took several hours, but he managed to work out his approach route along with an alternate route and had his fallback route planned in case things went south and he needed to make a quick exit. Michael committed everything to memory and downloaded the navigation details to an encrypted storage drive that he would use to transfer the data to the navigation system in his battle armor.

Michael lifted his head from the computer screen and noticed the clock on the wall above the office door, it said it was 1715 hours. He stretched his arms, neck and back as he realized that he hadn't eaten since breakfast. He decided that he would grab a quick meal and then do an equipment check to get everything ready for tomorrow and then grab some sleep.

At the thought of sleep, the nightmarish images from his dreams flashed through his mind and he found himself almost dreading to sleepâ€|

## 10. Why?

\*\*CHAPTER TEN:\*\*

\*\*Why?\*\*

\*\*LZ designated Alpha-One  
>10 kilometers North of Brusa  
>New Constantinople  
>August 12, 2536 â€“ 2205 Local Time

Michael looked back from the tree line at the Pelican sitting on the ground in the clearing. They had landed just over twenty minutes before and he'd done a perimeter walk 200m out from the LZ to make sure it was clear. It appeared that they had landed undetected. The plan was for the Pelican and her crew to remain at the LZ. If anyone did stumble on their position, the crew was to use the cover story that they were currently deployed on training maneuvers.

The sun was in its final stages of setting and the sky shone the final light of dusk. With the NAV points set and showing on his helmet display, he estimated that it would be dark enough by the time he reached the town's outskirts that he wouldn't be seen. There would possibly be still a large civilian presence on the streets moving about at that time and Michael had plotted a route to avoid (hopefully) the more heavily trafficked areas. He would also make use of his speed and stay in the shadows as he moved through the town to his objective.

Michael did one last radio check with the Pelican. After that he would be running dark. Radio silence would only be broken by either him or the Pelican crew in the event of an emergency which would mean that things had gone really bad. He couldn't help but give his head a shake at the irony of the situation he face.

I have to take higher security precautions running missions against my own species than against the Covenantâ€!

It just seemed so wrong to him and again his doubts started to rise to the surface, but he quickly pushed them back down and buried them (or at least tried to) as he knew he couldn't afford to be distracted by any thoughts other than the mission. That's all that mattered right now â€“ the mission.

Michael moved at a slower pace than he would have normally gone. The slowness may have been caused by his subconscious and the hesitation and doubts he was trying to suppress. He chalked up his slow pace to making sure that he didn't get spotted. He kept an eye on his motion tracker just to make sure that he didn't stumble into any unwary civilian.

Due to his slow pace, he'd reached the town's outskirts later but still within mission tolerances. The one benefit arriving later was that it was much darker out now, but that didn't give him as much time before sunrise. Pausing to check his route, he scanned his approach route. He could see that there were civilians still moving about, but the crowds were thinning out with it being later. Michael decided to stay under cover until the civilian traffic thinned out more. He didn't have to wait long and he was on the move again, staying in the shadows as he made his way towards his

destination.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Arden Muyser stomped heavily on the steps as he swayed his way up the stairs to his walk-up apartment. He was coming back from another night of doing the same thing he did almost every night â€“ drinking at the local bar. He fumbled with his keys and lock, finally managing to open the door and stagger through his rundown, ill-kept apartment. He threw his keys on the dresser as he stumbled into his bedroom. He managed to take off his coat and kick off his shoes, leaving them where he dropped them. His eyes were closed as he collapsed on his bed.

It didn't take long from collapsing on the bed, for Arden to drift off into an alcoholic induced sleep and start snoring. He'd lost all track of time, when he was startled awake when he felt something clamp across his face. Despite his drunkenness, Muyser's eyes popped open and he found himself waking up to a nightmare as he saw an armored gloved hand placed across his mouth. He then saw a helmet with a gold visor that only reflected the image of his terrified face back at him.

Arden tried to lift his head out of pure instinct, but the hand clamped over his mouth was strong and pinned his head in place. Panic started to seize his mind and he was about to start thrashing when he felt something pointy and sharp against his throat. Arden's eyes went wide in fear and his panicked thoughts were telling him to try yelling even though his mouth was covered over. Panic and fear were taking over his body. He didn't know if he could control his bowels when the gold visor helmeted being spoke in a soft quiet tone.

"Shhhhâ€| "

Arden lost control of his bladder as he froze in fear not knowing what to do or what to expect nextâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael had almost given up as his target wasn't there when he arrived. He waited long enough for his target to show up â€“ in a drunken state. He waited patiently as the target staggered into his apartment. He saw no lights turn on inside and waited a few more minutes for the target to get settled in. He had no problem forcing the lock on the door making his way quietly through the dark apartment.

Now he looked down at his target seeing the man look up at him with his eyes wide open, filled with shock and terror. Michael could only imagine how he must appear to his target who was sleepy and drunk. Michael had his left hand over the man's mouth to keep him from making any noise and had the tip of his combat knife pressed up against the man's throat using his other hand.

Michael spoke in a low voice to the man, "Remain quietâ€| I'm going to ask you a few questionsâ€| Nod if you understand?"

He saw the terrified man nod slowly to show that he understood. Michael slowly removed his hand from the man's mouth, but kept his

combat knife close to the man's throat to reaffirm the seriousness of the situation and make sure that the man did not try and do something stupid.

"Okayâ€| You name is Arden Muyser?" Michael asked again in a low voice.

The terrified man managed to croak out a response through his dry throat, "Y-yessssâ€|"

"You know Barton Jackson?"

Michael could see the man's eye widen slightly at that question and at first hesitated. He quickly reacted by pushing the tip of his knife into the man's throat, making sure not to break the skin, to show that he wasn't in a mood for playing games. For a moment it looked like the man was going to shake his head to respond negatively, but he stopped as he realized his natural response wasn't going to be the best response in this situation.

"Y-yeahâ€| I-I know himâ€|" the man's voice cracked slightly as he nodded slowly very aware of the knife being held against his throat.

"Where can I find him?"

"H-heâ€| He moves around a lotâ€| D-doesn't stay in the same place very longâ€|" the man replied, his voice still cracking.

"Where is he? Don't make me ask againâ€|" Michael asked with his voice taking on a more menacing tone.

"H-honestâ€| Iâ€| I don't know where he is right nowâ€|. H-heâ€| He has a woman here in townâ€|. He stays with her oneâ€| two days a week. P-pleaseâ€| I'm telling you everything I knowâ€| If Jackson wants something from me he contacts meâ€| I don't contact himâ€| Please don't hurt meâ€|" the man said as his will to resist crumbled from the fear of the situation he was caught in.

"I want a name and address for this woman?" Michael asked again in his low menacing tone.

He could see in the man's eyes as he battled with his inner turmoil of betraying someone he knew with saving his own skin. Michael again pushed his knife closer to the man's throat to make sure that the scales stayed on the side of self-preservation and the man would remain talkative.

"Nameâ€| Addressâ€| Now!" Michael said using a tone that this was not a question to be repeated or further discussion tolerated.

The man spoke quickly again in a panicked voice, "O-okayâ€| Okayâ€| Her name is Susan Currieâ€| She lives on the north-side of townâ€| Small houseâ€| Her address isâ€|"

Michael noted the address location of the woman as the man babbled out the information. He could see the man's eyes wide from fear and he could tell that the man wasn't lying. The information the man had provided gave him a slim lead to follow up on Jackson. Michael would need to return to the Pelican and access the com system to get more

information on this Susan Currie. There was only a small window of opportunity that Michael would have to maybe catch Jackson at this location which was a problem, but he had a much larger and more immediate problem â€“ what was he going to do with Arden Muyser now.

He knew he couldn't leave Muyser alive as he would warn Jackson that something scary was looking for him and that would cause Jackson to go into hiding and who knew how long it would take to find him again. Michael couldn't just cut Muyser's throat as that would draw a lot of attention maybe causing Jackson to go into hiding. This would have to be something quieter and more subtle to not draw any immediate attention.

There was a time when Michael wouldn't have hesitated to do what was needed to be done. He looked into the eyes of the terrified man and he felt something he had never felt before â€“ it was an icy feeling and it was causing him to hesitate. The feeling only lasted for a moment as his training kicked in as he knew what his duty was and where his allegiances lay â€“ there was only the mission. ONI had been quite explicit on how this situation should be handled.

Michael placed his left hand back over the man's mouth firmly clamping it over. The man started to struggle, but his cries were muffled by the armored gloved hand. Michael's strength easily held the man in place. He then pulled the knife away from the man's throat and used his right hand to pinch the man's nose shut â€“ cutting off the man's air supply.

He could see the man's terrified eyes bulge as he realized what was happening as he was starved of air. The man flailed his arms about â€“ striking at Michael's arms and body, but they bounced harmlessly off of his armor not breaking the death grip he had on the man.

Michael kept watching as the man's eyes showed fear and panic and he could see the life drain from them. The man's thrashing and flailing slowed down and weakened and then the man finally stopped his struggling. Michael held on for another minute to be sure. He did a quick check to sanitize the scene and make sure that he left no obvious evidence of his presence in the apartment. His next steps were to now head back to the LZ and the Pelican, get some rest and gather more information on the lead he now had on Jackson.

Michael moved to the apartment door, opening it quietly. Using his optics and motion sensors, he scanned for any potential threats. Civilian traffic was almost non-existent now in this part of town and he began to leave the apartment. He found himself pausing for a quick second. He fought the urge to turn around and look back. He pushed himself forward out the door, moving quickly and quietly into the late night, disappearing into the darkness. Leaving the man he had murdered behind him.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

It was still dark when Michael arrived back at the LZ. The Pelican was still there and he could see that the crew was asleep inside the ship. He decided not to wake the crew as he didn't feel like answering any potential questions. He would answer them in the morning as it appeared that they would be here at least another

day.

Moving to the tree line surrounding the LZ, Michael found a comfortable spot to sit down and relax. He kept his helmet on and used his suit's com system to hook into the Pelican's com system to relay to the main UNSC communications network. He did a search of UNSC and planetary databases for the name that Muyser offered up â€“ Susan Currie. She was now his only lead to tracking down Jackson.

He quickly confirmed that Muyser had given him the correct address for Currie. He pulled up a map of the town on his helmet display and oriented Currie's address to his current location. He started to map out his approach to his next target location.

He became aware that the sun was starting to rise higher, his augmented hearing could pick up the sounds of the Pelican flight crew starting to stir. He was satisfied that he now had a rough operations plan for his next target location. He planned on getting some sleep now and wait for darkness to execute his plan. He would brief the Pelican crew first and then get some sleepâ€!

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The sun was starting to set and Michael had already been up for a couple of hours. He used that time to grab a bite to eat, check his armor systems and his weapons along with reviewing his plan and approach to the next target. As he reviewed the data scrolling down his helmet display, he had to stifle a yawn. He had tried to sleep, but it had been a restless sleep. His dreams had been assaulted by visions and nightmares. He saw the faces of those humans he'd killed. He saw Andersâ€; Muyserâ€; all of them. He even saw the face of the insurrectionist leader he had taken out on Jericho VII. He hadn't thought of that man in years, he had been the first man Michael had ever killed.

Michael pushed his exhaustion down focusing on his current mission. He'd briefed the Pelican crew and they seemed to be taking it all in stride. Like all military operations it was a case of hurry up and wait. They were just hoping there wouldn't be those moments of stark terror on this mission that seemed to pop up between the waiting.

Checking the map and looking at the time and position of the sun, Michael knew he had to head out soon. He was going to have to circle around the town to get to the north side where the woman was located. He'd briefly toyed with the idea of cutting straight through the town as it would be faster, but there was also a higher chance of being seen. Michael planned to use that as his retreat path if things went bad. As he left the LZ, he wasn't sure if he would be able to locate Jackson, he was hoping that luck would be on his side tonight.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Several hours later, Michael found himself outside the house that his information indicated where Susan Currie lived. He stayed in the darkness and he'd had to make a few detours, but so far he hadn't been detected by the local population. He was able to find a spot which he could use an observation point to keep the house under surveillance while remaining undetected. He could feel his

frustrations start to grow as he watched the house, it was late but there were lights still on inside, indicating that someone was still up.

Michael activated his helmet's thermal optics and scanned the house for heat signatures. He picked four thermal signatures indicating people inside. Two of the signatures were large enough to indicate that they were adults. The other two thermal signatures were smaller, but too big to be household pets, that left the only possibility that there were children inside the house as well. That there were two thermal signatures indicating that there were adults inside was a positive sign, but there was no way for Michael to know if one of them was Jackson until he went in. That there were children inside complicated this mission and his entry to the house, but he had no choice. He had to find out if Jackson was in there as this might be his only chance to grab him for questioning. Pushing down his growing frustration, he decided that he would continue to watch and wait for as long as possible. He was hoping that everyone would go to bed soon that he could then make his move.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Barton Jackson had just settled into bed with his wife. Lying beside her was one of those precious moments that he savored as living the life of an outlaw and insurrectionist was not a life style suited for raising a family. He had been involved with the insurrection and running weapons and other supplies for years. It wasn't until he had met Susan and they had fallen in love and then had kids, that he really knew that he was fighting for something more than just money or some lofty political ideals.

He knew the risks that Susan and he were running and they had kept their marriage a secret. She knew he was involved with the insurrection, but he'd kept her in the dark about his activities to protect her and the kids. It was one thing if the UNSC tracked him down, he could live with that as he knew the risks, but if anything happened to Susan and their kids that was something he knew he couldn't handle.

Jackson had tried to stay away, but the kids â€“ Dylan had just turned six and Diana was two â€“ were growing up so fast and he hated not being there for them or Susan. When the Covenant invaded New Constantinople, he'd been fearful for his family's safety and used whatever contacts he had or strings he could pull as he scrambled to make arrangements to get them off planet. He thought he had everything in place as he'd been doing a deal with a man named Anders, who was also trying to get his family off planet. That deal had fallen through as Anders had mysteriously disappeared and the supply shipment had been destroyed in a fire. Jackson was suspicious that the UNSC had been behind the fire and Anders's disappearance, but there was no direct evidence to link anything, but he'd remained careful and watchful for any UNSC activity in the area.

The UNSC forces defeating the Covenant invasion had been a huge weight lifted off Jackson's mind. Though he would hate to admit it publicly, he was quite glad that the UNSC had done something more useful and productive than putting down insurrectionists. Even though it appeared that the Covenant had been defeated here, Jackson was a careful man and wasn't one for taking chances. He was still planning to get his wife and kids off planet as soon as possible making other

arrangements for them to leave within the next few weeks.

He was drifting off to sleep, savoring the memories of the time he had spent with his wife and kids this evening, when he awoke slightly startled by a small noise coming from outside the bedroom. Normally he would have been cautious, but he was with his family and his guard was down. He'd gotten a little careless thinking that no one knew about Susan. He got up to check as he was thinking that one of the kids was up and out of bed.

Jackson stumbled through the hallway half-asleep. He kept hearing a low scraping sound coming from the kitchen/living room area of the house and he moved towards the sound not giving it any real thought. As he entered the living room, rubbing his tired eyes, he didn't see any of the kids. In an instant, his survival instincts kicked in, but it was too late as he felt an armored glove clasp over his mouth from behind at the same time feeling the cold metal of a knife blade against his throat.

"Shhhhâ€|" came a low menacing voice from behind him.

A brief thought of resisting flashed through Jackson's head. The hand against his mouth had an unbreakable grip and the knife against his throat was the deciding factor against resisting.

"Answer my questions and you may have a chanceâ€|" the voice said.

Jackson knew that if this was the UNSC â€" especially ONI â€" then he had a next to no chance of surviving. His mind tried to find a way out, but the priority now was to keep his family safe and then maybe look for an opportunity to escape later. He nodded slowly, to indicate that he understood what was being said. He felt the hand release from his mouth, but the knife was held, still firmly, against his neck. Jackson just needed to buy time to find a way out of this situation.

"You're Barton Jackson?" the voice asked.

Jackson paused for a moment as he considered lying, but he had a feeling that his captor was testing him to see how he would respond. He nodded again very slowly feeling the cold metal against his throat.

"Yeahâ€| I'm Jackson." Barton croaked out in a rough whisper.

As Jackson's mind continued racing, trying to figure a way out of his predicament, he caught a glance of his captor, in the low light of the room in a reflection off the microwave door. "My godâ€|" was all that he could mutter as his hopes fell at seeing the huge armored being in the reflection.

"I want to know who your Innies contacts areâ€| Where are the cells located?" the voice asked in a menacing low tone.

Jackson was at a loss for words and couldn't respond as he dealt with the shock of seeing what his captor looked like. A jab of the sharp knife blade quickly reminded him of the seriousness of his situation. He was able to find his voice and was going to respond when suddenly a very young voice spoke out from behind, surprising both him and his

captor.

"Don't hurt my daddy!" the scared, yet strong and determined young voice said from the darkness.

Jackson felt himself being spun, effortlessly by his captor towards the voice. So much for trying to overpower him or whatever this thing is, he thought glumly. He didn't have long to dwell on this as he had recognized the voice. He'd been fearful for his life, but seeing his son standing there in the kitchen, that had changed the situation as any worries of his own safety vanished and his main concern was keeping his son and the rest of his family safe.

There now occurred a strange kind of Mexican standoff â€“ Jackson and his armored captor staring off against Jackson's son. Everything took on a surreal moment and Jackson knew that this standoff wouldn't last long and it could only end badly â€“ badly for him and his family.

Jackson found his voice and looking at his son spoke in a calm and quiet voice, "Dylanâ€| I want you to turn around and go back to your room and shut the door."

"Let go of my daddy!" Dylan said as he refused to listen. A stubborn look was on the child's face and he showed no signs of backing down. Jackson recognized the look as he would get the same stubborn look himself.

Jackson was starting to get a panicking feeling building up seeing that his son refused to back down from protecting his father. He saw he had no options, no plays left and only one way out. He needed to protect his family. At that moment that was the only thing that mattered.

"Whatever you want to knowâ€| I'll tell youâ€| Just don't hurt my son or familyâ€|" Jackson said in a whisper so that his son wouldn't hear.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael had entered the house easily and quietly. Everything had been going according to plan as he'd identified Jackson and drawn him out into the kitchen. It had been easy to subdue Jackson, he had thought of dragging Jackson away, but using his family as leverage would make the interrogation go easier and faster, without the need to resort to extreme methods.

What he hadn't counted on was one of the children waking up and stumbling in on them. Now that the child was here, the situation was in danger of spinning out of control. Neither one were an actual threat to him, but that they could make noise and draw attention to his presence was the main problem. ONI wanted these types of missions kept quiet â€“ it wasn't good for the public morale. Everyone knew that the UNSC and ONI did these activities, it was just that everyone wanted to pretend that they didn't happen.

Michael was caught off-guard when he heard Jackson whisper that he would tell him everything he wanted to know as long as he didn't hurt his family. He now faced a difficult decision. He could take Jackson away and interrogate him, ONI had already predetermined his fate. Yet

he found himself staring at the young boy trying to protect his father by staring down a Spartan. At that moment he was struck by a strange feeling. The boy had to be close to the age when he'd been taken for the Spartan program. The dead face of Kevin Anders came rushing back and he was struck by the thought of how he had made Anders's children fatherless. How many children had he made fatherless? How many wives had he made widows following ONI's mission imperatives?

The strange feeling flowed through his body as he stood there holding the knife to Jackson's throat and staring at the young boy. He suddenly realized what he was feeling -- guilt. Right at that moment Michael understood everything he had been feeling and his dreams. He was feeling guilty that he was hunting down and killing humans rather than spending all his effort and energy fighting the Covenant. But what could he do? He had his orders and his duty to do. A thought then crossed his mind that had never occurred to him. What if ONI was wrong? What if their orders were a mistake? Did he have to obey orders that were wrong?

All these thoughts went through his mind in the seconds that passed while caught in this strange stand-off. The seconds felt like hours as these thoughts raced through his mind and then came the realization what his "true" duty was and where his obligations lay...

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Jackson was trying to control his rising panic and the feeling that this was all going to end badly for him and his family. Surprise and shock engulfed him as he suddenly felt the pressure from the knife lessen on his throat. He was trying to figure out what was going on when he was hit with a bigger shock as his captor spoke.

"It's okay! Your father is helping the UNSC! He's just going to help me and then I'm going to leave!" the voice said in a calming tone.

The boy looked somewhat skeptically towards his dad, but Jackson was quick in the uptake and started nodding, "Y-yes! Yes! I-I'm just going to assist my UNSC friend here! Now go back to bed Dylan."

Dylan's face suddenly lit up in a huge smile at hearing his dad was going to help the UNSC. "Are you helping to fight those aliens?" he asked with boyish excitement growing in his voice at the thought of his dad helping beat back the dreaded and scary Covenant aliens.

Jackson was going to reply, but his captor beat him to the response. "Yes! Your dad is helping me to fight the Covenant! Now listen to your father and go to bed as we have important business to discuss."

Jackson watched his son leave, somewhat reluctantly, heading back to his room. Once he heard the door close on his son's bedroom, he let out an audible sigh of relief. He was surprised to feel the grip on him loosen. Rather than fight or run away, he turned, with confusion and puzzlement running down his face, looking at his now former captor. He finally got a good look of the huge armor shaped man --

that looked like a robot â€“ that had to be at least seven feet tall. Getting a better look of this "man" reinforced that fighting or running away wasn't an option.

"Why?" was all that Jackson could mutter, keeping his voice low as to not disturb his wife.

His shock and puzzlement only grew more as the huge armored man replied, "Because it's the right thing to doâ€|"

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael knew that there would be repercussions from his actions, but he wasn't scared of them and would deal with whatever happened. He was still a Spartan.

\_ONI can go screw themselvesâ€| I'll complete the missions the way I see fit\_, he thought as a smirk came to his face. He pushed any thoughts or worries about ONI from his head and refocused on the here and now as he still had this situation to deal with.

Michael heard Jackson's question and his reply seemed natural and right. As he answered he felt like a weight was lifting off his soul.

\_This is the right thing to doâ€|\_

Jackson still looked in shock, all he could say was "T-Thank youâ€|"

"Don't thank me for anything yet. Here is how things are going to go down. I will ask my questions and you will tell me everything you know. Then you and your family are going to pack up, leave this planet and disappearâ€| Do you understand me?" Michael said in a low serious tone.

"Y-Yesâ€|" Jackson responded vigorously nodding his head.

"If I find out that you lied to me or deliberately held anything backâ€| There is nowhere in this galaxy you can hide that I won't find you. If I have to hunt you downâ€| I will show no mercyâ€| Do we have an understanding?" Michael said with his voice taking on an almost menacing growling tone this time.

Michael could see that Jackson understood as his eyes widen as he nodded again vigorously his understanding. He then told Jackson to sit down and then proceeded to ask his questions. Jackson was most co-operative and forth coming with his answers.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The questioning went on for nearly an hour and at times Jackson had even offered up information that Michael hadn't even asked questions to. His audio and video recording devices captured everything. The Spartan had a self-satisfied smirk on his face as Jackson was providing a veritable mother lode of information on insurgent operations not only on New Constantinople, but also in another six systems! Michael knew that he would have to do some "creative" editing when he got back to base as he didn't want ONI questioning what he'd done here tonight.

\_ONI might eventually catch up to him, but I've given him a chance and it won't be me doing the hatchet jobâ€\_|

Michael had always been considered the lonerâ€| the rebelâ€| among the Spartans. At the thought of going up against ONI's potential wrath turned his smirk into a smile as he relished the challenge.

His attention refocused on Jackson as he noticed that he had stopped speaking and was slumped in the chair.

"That's everything?" Michael asked.

"Yeahâ€| That's everythingâ€| That's all of itâ€|" Jackson said in a monotone voice as he was drained from betraying the insurgency that he had worked for all these years. But what choice or options did he have?

Michael spoke, "Okayâ€| Like I saidâ€| After I leave here, you will gather your family and go to the evacuation center in Antioch. Your family will be on the list for evacuation from the system. You'll arrive at Reach and then you and your family can disappear from there. You talk to no one and I mean no one!" he said again in his low growling tone.

Michael hadn't planned that far ahead yet for getting Jackson and his family off planet. It looked like he was going to have to call in another favor from Vice-Admiral Whitcomb in order to make this happen. If he couldn't get the Vice-Admiral to play ball then maybe he could get a "little creative" with the ONI security clearances he had been given. Either way Michael was going to keep his word to Jackson.

Jackson nodded his head wearily in understanding. He looked up at the armored man that he had spilled his guts to. By all rights he should be dead by now or locked up in one of ONI's deep dark cells, but this "person" was giving him a chance and a way out to save his family. He watched as the "person" turned and started towards the door to leave. Jackson managed to croak out, "Thankâ€| Thank you." He watched in amazement as the huge armored man turned and looked at him with that gold-visor helmet and nod.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael left the house as quietly as he'd entered, making a quick return to the LZ. For some reason he found himself moving faster than he had in weeks. The last time he had felt like this was when he was fighting the Covenant.

He made it back to the LZ with no problems, waking up the Pelican crew to get them to prep for an immediate dust-off. The crew grumbled about being rudely woken up, but he didn't want to waste any more time here. He had plans and arrangements to make and not a lot of time to do it in. On the long return flight, Michael worked on how he was going to ask Vice-Admiral Whitcomb for this favor.

It was early morning when the Pelican finally arrived back at the firebase. Michael was tired, but yet he felt different. He wasted no time exiting the Pelican to head towards the armory to get out of his

battle armor. He had to make a call to the Vice-Admiral and then he had to ready his report to ONI. He would figure out later when he would fit in food and sleep into his schedule. The face of Jackson's son was in his mind and that was more than enough motivation to keep him going for now.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael was patient as he managed to talk his way through to the Vice-Admiral's chief of staff. Commander Wright at first wasn't going to patch the call through, but he decided to gamble big time.

"This is a priority ONI situation and I need to talk to the Vice-Admiralâ€| Immediately!" Michael said with urgency in his voice. He had never played poker before and wasn't familiar with all the terms, but at that moment he unknowingly had the best poker face in play.

Commander Wright shrugged knowing that trying to stare down or dissuade a Spartan was a losing proposition. "Alrightâ€| I'll put you throughâ€|" Wright replied as he forwarded Michael's video call through.

Michael explained the situation to the Vice-Admiral â€" omitting several facts from the story as to not unduly influence the Vice-Admiral's decision â€" and stressing that it was important and in the best interests of the UNSC that this family get evacuated as soon as possible.

"You must be mistaking me as your own personal travel agent!" Whitcomb said over the video link, his voice sounding incredulous at the request.

Michael watched as the Vice-Admiral got a painful look on his face, slowly shaking his head while Michael finished presenting his case to get One Barton Jackson, his wife and two children priority clearance for evacuation.

"So I'm to assume that this request is related to another ONI black-op mission? Wait... Be lay thatâ€| I'm almost afraid to know, so in this matter I'm going to play ignorant and grant you your request Sierra-113." Whitcomb said.

Michael could feel a smile grow on his obviously tired face, but he found the energy to come to attention and salute for the video call. "Thank you, sir!" he said with the obvious happiness and relief in his voice.

The Vice-Admiral shook his head again slowly, but this time he also got a smile on his face from seeing the Spartan's obvious happy mood.

Michael started to reach forward to end the video call, when the Vice-Admiral spoke up again, "Sierra-113â€| Next time you go out on one of your ONI jauntsâ€| Can you kindly not commit UNSC resources to being your own personal taxi service or at least let me know ahead of timeâ€| Understood?"

Michael could see that the Vice-Admiral was still smiling, but he could tell by the tone in Whitcomb's voice that he was being serious.

"Crystal clear, sir!" he replied still smiling.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael cut the video call with the Vice-Admiral and let out a huge sigh of relief. Considering how Whitcomb could have responded to his request things were turning out pretty good and falling into place. He was feeling pretty optimistic about the whole situation.

\_Things are turning out for the good\_, Michael thought to himself as he stood up and stretched. His plan now was to grab a bite to eat first, then head to the armory to clean up his battle armor. After that he would put together his report for ONI and then grab some sleep. He had a feeling that he would be able to sleep pretty good or at least better than he had recently.

Michael would in retrospect kick himself for having voiced his thoughts about how good things were turning out, thereby jinxing everything.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Deep in the emptiness of the outer fringes of the New Constantinople system, a very large area started to shimmer and space itself started to become distorted. The very fabric of existence appeared to start tearing itself apart. It was a harbinger of death comingâ€|

## 11. Make sure that the Covenant pays

\*\*CHAPTER ELEVEN:\*\*

\*\*Make sure that the Covenant pays for thisâ€!\*\*

\*\*Orbital Defense Platform â€" Whiskey-Tango-004  
>in orbit around New Constantinople<br>August 14, 2536 â€" 1722 Zulu Time\*\*

Ensign Greg Hamilton had the afternoon duty officer shift on the Orbital Defense Platform (ODP) with the designation Whiskey-Tango-004 or as her crew affectionately called her "The Iron Bitch". The ODP that he served on was a Mark II series and he'd been aboard her ever since he had started his tour of duty on New Constantinople. So far he'd been lucky to survive through the Covenant invasion as they'd invaded outside his ODP's defense sector. The Iron Bitch had only been in minor engagements and providing support during the UNSC's counter-attack to destroy the Covenant's foothold. For Hamilton, he didn't take his luck for granted as two of the "Iron Bitch's" sister ODPs hadn't been as lucky. They had been destroyed by plasma fire after damaging or destroying a number of Covenant ships during the initial attack.

The Mark II series ODP's primary weapon system was the Mk III Magnetic Accelerator Cannon (MAC). This second generation of ODP, besides having a heavier MAC weapon system, was equipped with heavy autocannons and Archer missile launchers for close in defense. The Mark II was also equipped with heavier armor that allowed it to take a heavier pounding in a fight compared to the earlier Mark I series. Unfortunately there was currently only eight Mark IIs surviving in orbit around New Constantinople after the Covenant invasion. These

eight had been moved to provide overlapping fields of fire to protect the planet. Fortunately these weren't the only ODPs in place to protect the planet. There was also twenty-four of the lighter armored and armed Mark Is, which helped fill in the gaps in defensive coverage.

Hamilton was currently in the Command Information Center (CIC) for the ODP. His main duty today was to oversee the crew manning the communications, sensors and weapons stations. He could access all the necessary data and information from his station's terminal display or he could look up at the large display panel that gave real-time information on the status of the planetary defense network for New Constantinople. He looked up from his station to the large display panel against the far wall of the CIC that displayed the green status lights of all thirty-two operational ODPs in orbit around the planet. The ODPs had been organized into battle clusters. Each Mark II ODP was surrounded and supported by three Mark Is. This battle cluster arrangement was designed because even though the Mark IIs carried a heavier MAC, it had a slower rate of fire. The Mark Is would support and provide cover for the larger ODP between reloads.

Since the UNSC had beaten back the Covenant invasion and re-established control of orbital space. Vice-Admiral Whitcomb had every available shipyard and manufacturing facility working overtime on building more ODPs for the defense of the planet. There were lots of rumors circulating around right now. One rumor went that there were at least a dozen Mark I's almost ready in the yards and that they could be deployed in the next two weeks with at least five Mark II's ready within the next four to five weeks.

The rumor that Hamilton hoped was true was that components for the newer Mark III ODPs were being shipped out from Reach and would be here within the month. He had read and studied the design specs on the Mark IIIs. Those stations were huge structures, like floating cities in space. This newest series of ODPs were more heavily armored, carrying even more firepower. Unfortunately they had only been deployed around Earth and Reach due to their enormous size, construction resources and power required. The Magnetic Accelerator Cannons on the Mark I's and II's could take out the smaller Covenant ships in one shot, but it took quite a number of rounds to penetrate and take out the shields and armor on the larger Covenant ships especially the Battle Cruiser and Super Carrier classes. The MAC's on the Mark IIIs were the Mk. V model, they were supposedly so big and powerful that they could take out those large ship classes in no more than two or three shots.

Hamilton let his mind wander, hoping that if they did get any Mark III ODPs that he would get the opportunity to transfer over, not that he didn't enjoy serving on board the Iron Bitch. It was good duty serving on the ODPs. The crews had comfortable quarters and lots of good food and amenities. There was a regular leave schedule and the crew could shuttle down to the planet surface for R&R.

There was no way that Hamilton would trade serving on an ODP to being a Marine. He had watched the news vids of the ground fighting and he could even see a lot of the larger explosions on the surface especially when that part of the planet was in its night terminator. The latest news reports had the Marines in the final stages of cleaning up the last remnants of the Covenant foothold. The reports had it was mostly diehard Elites that refused to quit or surrender

that were holding up the ground forces.

\_Yes sirâ€| there is no life like thisâ€| Warmâ€| Dryâ€| Hot foodâ€| Hot waterâ€| Definitely better off than those ground pounders\_, Hamilton thought to himself smiling.

Almost as if in response to his thoughts, a signal appeared on his video display. Hamilton was a little irritated at having his pleasant daydreaming interrupted, but he was an efficient officer and shouldered his responsibilities well, that was why he was the duty officer. He pressed the touch screen button that opened the com channel on his headset.

"CIC Controlâ€| Status update?" Hamilton said into his headset.

"Sirâ€| This is Evansâ€|" came the female voice over his headset.

Hamilton immediately pictured the face and name of the person that was talking to him. Audrey Evans was an enlisted technical specialist and her duty station was monitoring the long range sensors of the ODP. Those sensors scanned the vast empty reaches of space in the New Constantinople planetary system looking for any threats. He knew that Evans was one of the best sensor operators on the ODP. From some unknown reason he shivered as she spoke.

"Sirâ€| My sensors are picking up some anomalies in grid sector H128 by R159." Evans continued.

Hamilton's mind immediately snapped to attention and he called up the referenced grid info on his display screen. That grid location was in an empty portion of space that wasn't used by UNSC ships as they usually entered the system on a different vector. "Can you tell what it is?" he asked trying to keep a growing bad feeling in check.

"Not yet, sir. It's at the extreme range of our sensors."

"Could it be an equipment malfunctionâ€|natural space occurrence?" Hamilton asked with the tension increasing in his voice.

"No, sir. I've performed an equipment checkâ€| I've also got ODP Whiskey-Tango-010 confirming the same readings." Evans reported.

Hamilton paused as he was now aware that all the duty crew in the CIC were now watching and listening to the exchange between himself and Evans. He pressed a couple of buttons on his keyboard and the large CIC display panel changed to show a larger view of the planetary system. The display showed New Constantinople and then marked the area where the "anomaly" was located in relation to the planet.

Hamilton could feel his mouth go dry and he didn't want to ask, but his duty required him to voice the thoughts he had, "Evansâ€| If you had to guessâ€| What do you think is causing that anomaly?"

There was a long pause and then Evans's words came slowly with no self-doubt in them, "If I had to guessâ€| I would say that we're picking up the start of a Slipspace ruptureâ€| A big Slipspace

ruptureâ€|"

Hamilton didn't hesitate. He quickly pressed the key commands to send out an alert warning to the planetary defense system along with a flash traffic message to fleet headquarters on the planet surface as well as to all UNSC ships in system.

The CIC was in dead silence as the alert message was sent outâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Vice-Admiral Whitcomb moved at a brisk pace as he entered the fleet command center in his headquarters' building in Antioch. Even though he moved quickly, he didn't show any emotion or appear panicked or flustered by the alert message. He knew that it wouldn't help morale if the troops saw their commander looking out of sorts by an alert. As he made his way over to the main holographic display table, he saw Commander Wright already there. The Commander was looking at his tablet, stabbing and swiping the tablet screen at an almost frantic pace. Whitcomb paused to look around and could see the command center staff was running around and working themselves up into an almost panic state.

The Vice-Admiral couldn't let this continue. He knew that panicked people make mistakes and the mistakes these people could make would get other good people killed. Whitcomb caught the eye and nodded to Commander Wright. It took only a moment for Wright to understand as he looked around and picked up on the vibe and mood in the command center.

Wright didn't hesitate, "ATTENTION ON DECK!" he shouted so that everyone in the command center could hear.

All the personnel in the command center reacted in unison and snapped to attention as they heard the command and saw the Vice-Admiral standing just inside the entrance of the command center.

Whitcomb paused as he looked around the command center at his people. He was proud of his people and knew what they were capable of doing. They had already turned back one Covenant invasion, they could face whatever this was.

"Okayâ€| Everybody focus on your jobsâ€| We don't know what we're facingâ€| We'll deal with whatever it is as we have always faced the unknownâ€| We'll do our duty as requiredâ€|" Whitcomb said not raising his voice, but sounding calm and strong to reassure everyone.

He then nodded and everyone went back to work. The Vice-Admiral could see his words almost take an immediate effect as all the personnel continued working, but the panic mood that threatened to overtake the command center seemed to have passed.

Whitcomb moved briskly to the holographic table, standing next to his chief of staff. "What's our status Commander?" the Vice-Admiral asked maintaining his calm tone, while standing in a relaxed parade rest stance with his hands clamped behind his back.

Commander Wright pressed some commands on his tablet and the

holographic table came to life bringing up a 3-D representation of the New Constantinople system. All the planetary bodies appeared followed by symbols representing all UNSC fleet units in the system. "All available fleet units are reporting their status right nowâ€| Fleet units are moving to form up behind the moonâ€| Planetary ODP's reporting they are at full alertâ€| he reported.

Whitcomb nodded in approval as he noted how his fleet responded to this unknown threat. "Any further update on what we're facing out there?" he asked not taking his eyes off the holographic display.

Wright shook his head as he checked his tablet for updates, "Nothing beyond our initial scansâ€| It's just at the edge of our scanning range and whatever it isâ€| it's large and generating a lot of electronic noise out there that we can't get a solid read on it."

The Vice-Admiral pondered the dilemma that he was facing, He was working in the dark and he needed more information. He looked over the blinking icons that represented his ships on the holographic display.

"Which ships are closest to the anomaly?" he asked without taking his eyes of the display.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Captain Gebhuza Contee looked at the main status display panel on the bridge of his Paris-class heavy frigate \_Desperate Warrior\_. His frigate was lead ship with four other ships in his small flotilla. The other ships were the more lightly armed and armored Stalwart-class light frigates. Captain Contee had been leading his flotilla on exercises in the outer reaches of the New Constantinople system, when the alert flash message had come in. He had immediately ordered his ships to red alert and started to make a course change to move his flotilla back closer to New Constantinople. This plan all changed when a call had come in from Vice-Admiral Whitcomb with new orders.

The Vice-Admiral outlined to the Captain, that at the moment, they only had the roughest of ideas of what was going on as the spatial anomaly was at the extreme edge of their sensors. The Vice-Admiral needed Contee to take his flotilla out closer to the target area. They needed "eyes" on that sector of space and fast. The Captain quickly responded to his new orders, having his flotilla change directions for the co-ordinates of the area in question. The Vice-Admiral reminded the Captain that while it was important to find out what was going on, that he was to protect his command or as the Vice-Admiral had succinctly put it, "Go in take a quick look and then get the hell out of thereâ€|"

The Captain turned to the sensor and tracking stations on the bridge. "Anything yet?" he asked the senior sensor specialist.

"We're still getting lots of interference, sir. It seems to be clearing up as we get closerâ€|" replied the specialist.

The Captain grimaced as he hated going into something like this not knowing what they were facing. He had deployed his flotilla into an

inverted wedge formation, with his ship at the tip of the wedge.

Contee turned to the communications station on the bridge, "Are the other ships getting the same readings as us?"

"Yes, sirâ€| Other ships report no change in readings." replied the communications officer as he checked in with the other ships in the flotilla.

The Captain continued grimacing at his situation. "Are all our readings being sent back to Fleet HQ?" he asked as he turned to look out his bridge's observation window.

"Aye, sirâ€| Everything is going back in real-time." replied the communications officer.

The Captain nodded as he continued looking out the observation window. "NAVâ€| Prepare to increase speedâ€| COMâ€| Inform the flotilla to prepare to match our speedâ€|" Contee ordered. He was getting tired of not knowing what was happening. He heard the affirmatives come in from each station and he felt the comforting rumble as his ship started to increase speed towards the unknown anomaly.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

It took another ten minutes at increased speed, when his sensor station had something new to report. "Sirâ€| Interference is clearingâ€| We're starting to get some solid readings nowâ€|" Contee could hear the tension increase in the crewman's voice. The Captain was just trying to remember to breathe normally, when everything changed.

"SLIPSPACE RUPTUREâ€| DETECTING SLIPSPACE RUPTURE!" the sensor specialist yelled, completely forgetting decorum and protocol.

Contee acted immediately, "COMâ€| Send flash traffic to Fleet HQâ€| Detecting Slipspace ruptureâ€| Inform them we are still advancing to gather more informationâ€|" he said in a calm tone to try and keep the mood calm on the bridge.

It seemed that the captain's orders had barely left his mouth, when the sensor specialist yelled out again.

"CONTACTS! I've got multiple contacts entering normal space..."

"Can you identify how many and who they are?" Contee asked trying and failing to keep a bad feeling from rising from the pit of his stomach.

"10â€| 20â€| 25â€| No waitâ€| 50â€| More coming through!" the sensor said and then he paused. The Captain turned and looked at the sensor station, looking at the sensor specialist. The crewman manning the sensor station was a young looking man in his early twenties. The captain saw him look up from his sensor display console and could see the crewman's face white in fear.

The Captain met the crewman's eyes and calmly asked him, "What is it

son?"

"They're Covenantâ€| They're all Covenantâ€|" the crewman said with fear in his voiceâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The mood in the fleet command center on New Constantinople had soured badly at the news of Covenant ships entering the system.

"Sirâ€| Desperate Warrior and her flotilla has at least eighty-four Covenant ships coming out of Slipspace with more emergingâ€|" Wright reported as he read the latest update from his tablet.

Whitcomb had a somber look on his face as he watched the holographic display table update to indicate Covenant forces now in system. "Do we have any info of what ship classes we're facing?" he asked trying not to show his anger and frustration.

The thought quickly flashed through Whitcomb's mind, but he didn't betray his feelings to his staff, \_Not nowâ€| Not nowâ€| We needed more time to rebuild our defensesâ€|\_

"Captain Contee is trying to reposition his flotilla to get a better scan of the incoming Covenant fleetâ€| It appears that they have already formed up and are advancing on him." Wright reported in a monotone voice.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Captain Contee maintained a firm grip on the arms of his bridge station chair as his ship shuddered from another near miss. "Report!" he ordered in a strong firm voice as he tried to maintain the exterior presence of a Captain in control of the situation. It seemed to take all of his self-control to maintain any sort of composure facing the nightmare that was advancing on him and his ships.

"Minor hull damage on the port forward sectionâ€| We seem to just be at the edge of their heavy plasma cannon range." reported the damage control officer.

"Status of the rest of our ships?" Contee asked.

"All other ships report no or minimal damageâ€|. Except for the frigate \_Sun and Shadow\_â€| She took a major hit that breached her hullâ€| They report that they have managed to seal the breach and put out the fires and stopped venting airâ€| She's maintaining speed." reported the communications officer.

"Sensorsâ€| What's the latest on the Covenant fleet?" Contee asked trying to rationalize that whatever information they could gather would balance off any damage (or losses) they took.

"Sir, I've confirmed ninety-two hard targets that have emerged from Slipspace. I have no indications of anymore Covenant ships emerging into normal space." replied the sensor specialist.

\_Damnâ€| We've never seen the Covenant assemble this size of fleet before\_, Contee thought as he saw the display indicating the huge number of Covenant ships in system.

Up to this point in the war, the Covenant had only sent in small groups of ships to attack human colonies. In most encounters the humans had been able to either match the numbers or slightly outnumber the Covenant ships, but the Covenant's tech advantage in weapons and shields heavily offset any numerical advantages that the UNSC had been able to muster in most cases.

It was only on those rare occasions that the UNSC had gathered such an overwhelming numerical advantage and had also been willing to accept horrific losses had they been able to defeat a Covenant fleet, like Vice-Admiral Whitcomb had done with the first Covenant invasion fleet. Needless to say those types of encounters had been very rare so far in the war. The UNSC was now facing its worst nightmare as the Covenant now appeared to be gathering huge fleets together to smash human defenses and Captain Contee's tiny flotilla was now in the way as this juggernaut moved towards them and New Constantinople.

"Have you confirmed any types or ship classes?" the Captain asked.

The tone of the sensor specialist's voice changed as he spoke, "Sirâ€| I don't have exact data on all the targets, but from what I have been able to lock on and track. I have been able to identify at least twenty-eight CCS-class battlecruisers, fourteen CAS-class assault carriers, eighteen ORS-class heavy cruisers and twenty-two CPV-class heavy destroyersâ€| Sir, they appear to be trying to close the range with us!"

"NAVâ€| Increase speed and maintain our distance from them!" the Captain quickly ordered.

"Aye, sirâ€|"

"COMâ€| Make sure that Fleet HQ has got a copy of our sensor readingsâ€|" Captain Contee order, but before he could say anything else he was suddenly interrupted.

"CONTACTS!" yelled the sensor specialist.

"Report!" ordered the Captain as he wondered what was happening now.

"Sir, we're picking up multiple contactsâ€| Small fast moving bogies have just appeared and are moving to intercept usâ€| They should be on us in an estimated five minutes!" reported the specialist.

Damn! That could only mean that they've launched fighters or gunboats to catch up and engage us\_, Contee thought as he got a grasp of the changing tactical situation.

"Numbers?" asked the Captain

"Fifty plus incomingâ€|" the specialist said as Contee could see his face blanch as he reported the incoming wave of enemy ships.

Captain Contee only paused for a second, "Bring all point defense weapons on-line and make sure that our Archers have solid locks before we engage. COMâ€| Alert the rest of the group and tell them to prepare for incoming fighter attack."

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Whitcomb looked at the information as it was updated on the holographic display and the tablet he now had in his hand.

Ninety-Two ships with at least twenty-eight battlecruisers, he thought to himself as he absorbed the information that was coming in from the tiny flotilla that was in the way of this approaching Covenant wave of death.

He did the cruel math in his head that it would cost him at least three ships for every Covenant ship, It would take at least eighty-four ships to just take out the battle cruisers! I've only got one hundred and fifteen ships that are battle-ready, he thought.

He realized that there was no way that his fleet could go out and meet this incoming Covenant fleet in open battle, but he at least had an ace up his sleeve â€“ the ODPs.

The Orbital Defense Platforms had as much firepower as his heavy cruisers, but they couldn't move. The key was to keep the ODPs safe to use their firepower to take out the heavier Covenant ships. The fleet would have to act as a shield and keep themselves between the Covenant fleet and the ODPs while the ODPs acted as Whitcomb's sword to strike back. This would mean that his ships would take heavy casualties and losses to be that shield, but it seemed to be the only way that they would even have a chance against an enemy fleet of this size.

Whitcomb quickly analyzed the Covenant fleet dispositions and approach from the intel his sensors and Captain Contee's flotilla had gathered. Orders were then sent out to the fleet units to reposition themselves between the Covenant and the ODPs. The downside to this placement of ships is that they would literally be with their backs against the wall as they would be close to the gravity well of the planet and there wouldn't be a lot of room to maneuver.

The Vice-Admiral turned to Commander Wright, "Tell Captain Contee that it's time for him to get out of there. Tell him to make best speed to break away and get back here."

Wright nodded and quickly got the orders flashed to the Captain.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Fleet Master Duran 'Korahee looked at the tactical display, on the bridge of his flagship the CSO-class supercarrier Glorious Devotion, and was not pleased with his current tactical situation. The Fleet Master's task force had come out of Slipspace too soon and had entered this star system too far out from the planet that was home to the human heretics that threatened the Great Journey.

Damn the incompetents that gave us these Slipspace coordinates! We should have entered normal space much closer to that human vermin planet! We have now given them time to organize their defenses\_, 'Korahee thought trying to control his anger at the lost

opportunity.

The Fleet Master took the opportunity to get his task force in order before they advanced on this planet. Again the anger and disappointment flowed briefly through his thoughts as now it would cost him more warriors and ships to fulfill his divine mission and destroy the humans on this planet than it should have if they had arrived closer in. Those thoughts were quickly pushed away as one of the bridge crew manning the sensor station spoke up.

"Fleet Master! I have five human ships approaching us!" reported the Sangheili warrior.

The Fleet Master didn't hesitate. "Order the task force to move to engage the humans!"

'Korahee paused for a moment as he tried to absorb all the information and the situation that was developing. He then turned towards the bridge communications station. "Inform the rest of the task force to remain in Slipspace for now." he quickly ordered.

This caused some strange and puzzled looks to appear on the bridge crew's faces, but the order was sent out without question or delay.

This mistake may yet still be reversed, 'Korahee thought as he quickly made adjustments to his original attack plan to now take in account this new situation. A predatory smile came to the Fleet Master's face as he thought of what he was going to spring on those vermin humans with the remaining fifty ships of his task force still in Slipspace!

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The minutes passed by and Fleet Master 'Korahee could feel his impatience start to build again. He had ordered his ships that were in normal space to pursue the small group of human ships that had come close to his task force. Unfortunately the human ships had managed to keep at the extreme range of his task force's weapons. They had fired plasma torpedoes at the fleeing human ships, but had caused minimal damage and hadn't slowed them down enough to close the range.

Ship Master Phur 'Doravee who commanded the Glorious Devotion could see the Fleet Master's frustration growing and that wasn't a good sign when your commander was showing his frustration before the battle had been engaged. The Ship Master needed to do something to change the Fleet Master's state of mind.

"Fleet Master! If I may suggest something!" 'Doravee spoke in a respectful tone to not offend the Fleet Master and have his wrath turn on him.

'Doravee saw 'Korahee turn and give him a look that warned him that he was treading a fine line. "What is it?" said the Fleet Master trying to keep his frustration in check.

"Sir, if I may suggestâ€| We could launch our fighters to pursue, overtake and destroy those human shipsâ€|" 'Doravee said still keeping the respectful tone in his voice. The Ship Master could see

'Korahée pondering the suggestion and quickly added, "Even if the fighters do not destroy the larger human shipsâ€| they could damage and slow them down enough for our task force to close and destroy them."

The Ship Master saw the Fleet Master ponder his suggestion and then spoke, "Your suggestion has meritâ€| Launch fighters to pursue and destroy those vermin."

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Captain Contee almost got thrown from his bridge chair as his ship shuddered from a hit.

"Report!" Contee ordered as he tried to make himself heard over the din of the bridge crew shouting commands and the ship's intercom systems buzzing with reports and updates from other parts of the ship.

"Sirâ€| We have fires on decks four and fiveâ€| they're under control... Aft section deck six is exposed to spaceâ€| We're venting airâ€| We lost partial power to deck twoâ€| Engineering is reporting some power surgesâ€|" reported the damage control officer.

"NAVâ€| Maintain course and speedâ€|" the Captain ordered. Contee heard the navigation officer respond in acknowledgement.

Contee turned to the weapons station, "Status on enemy targets?" he asked.

"There were seventy Seraph-class fighters in that strikeâ€| We have confirmed fifteen kills from our point defense cannons and Archer missiles." came the report.

The Captain nodded. "Status of our ships?" as he turned to the communications station.

"Sirâ€| The Conscientious Objector and Red Palm are reporting damage, but nothing majorâ€| The Casey is reporting fires and major hull damageâ€| Sun and Shadow is reporting major damage and firesâ€| They've lost power to their weapons systemsâ€| They're losing speed and falling out of formation!"

The ship shuddered as it took another hit, "Seraphs coming in for another pass!" came a cry from the weapons station.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Vice-Admiral Whitcomb watched the holographic display as it showed real-time status updates of the battle that was occurring in the outer reaches of the system. He could see the icons representing his ships â€" his people â€" struggling to stay alive from the fighter strike and stay ahead of the onrushing Covenant fleet. If all it took was to will those holographic icons representing his ships to move faster those ships would be half way across the system by now. But all Whitcomb could do was watch helplessly as his people endured running the gauntlet and he knew deep down that he was going to lose ships and people.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Smoke was filling the bridge of the \_Desperate Warrior\_. Contee coughed and shouted out over the noise of the bridge, "REPORT!"

"Sirâ€| All decks reporting damageâ€| Major outer hull damageâ€| Minor damage to the engines, but we are maintaining speedâ€| MAC has taken major damage and is off-lineâ€| Hanger Bay exposed to spaceâ€| " the damage control officer reported causing Contee to grimace as he heard how much damage his ship had taken.

The Captain was about to ask for a status update on the other ships in his flotilla, when the bridge observation window was lit up by a huge blinding light causing the bridge crew to either look away or shield their eyes.

"The \_Casey\_â€| She just blew up!" came the cry from the sensor station.

Contee froze at the feeling of having lost a ship under his command â€" a ship and crew that he was responsible for. He pushed down the thoughts and feelings as they would have to be dealt with later, much later.

"Where are those enemy fighters?" Contee demanded.

"It appears they're breaking off. We took out another eighteen fighters in that last strike." came the report.

Contee was about to let out a sigh of relief, that maybe they had survived this ordeal, when the communication stations reported, "Sirâ€| \_Sun and Shadow\_ is reporting that their losing powerâ€| engines and weapons off-line. They're reporting fires and major hull damage."

Contee punched some commands on his display terminal at his station and brought up communications, "\_Sun and Shadow\_â€| this is \_Desperate Warrior\_â€| Do you read me? Come in \_Sun and Shadow\_â€|"

The video display was garbled and distorted, but Contee could hear something coming over the audio channel. "\_Desperate Warrior\_â€| This is \_Sun and Shadow\_â€| We can barely read youâ€| Overâ€|"

Contee was relieved that he had established communications with the frigate, "This is Captain Conteeâ€| Who am I talking to?" he asked as he did not recognize the voice.

The voice coughed several times, "This is Ensign Mooreâ€| Sir." came the reply.

Contee was shocked, "Where's Commander Cruz?" he asked.

"He's dead, sirâ€| Most of the bridge crew is deadâ€| I'm the only officer still alive on the bridge." Moore reported as he coughed several more times.

Contee was stunned, but he refocused on the situation at hand. The voice of Ensign Moore sounded young â€" young and scared. "What's your statusâ€| son?" the Captain asked in a calm tone as he didn't

want to dump more on the Ensign's plate than what he was already dealing with.

"Engines are off-lineâ€| Weapons are goneâ€| We have fires on most decks or they're exposed to space and we're venting airâ€| We're dead in space, sir." the Ensign sounded scared, but he had managed to remain calm while delivering the death knell of his ship.

The Captain knew what had to be done. It was the final duty of any UNSC crew â€" it was the law, "Ensign Mooreâ€| You are directed to implement UNSC Emergency Priority Order 098831A-1. As per this order, you are to make sure all databanks and nav info is wipedâ€| You will then scuttle your shipâ€| Do you understand?" he asked in a calm and deliberate tone.

United Nations Space Command Emergency Priority Order 098831A-1 also known as the "Cole Protocol" was the order given to all UNSC personnel that they had to ensure that no data containing Slipspace navigation data about Earth or any other human world was to fall into the Covenant's hands. The order also stated that to prevent capture, any UNSC or Human vessel, in the event of an emergency evacuation, was to self-destruct, after wiping all data.

"Can you evacuate by life pod or Pelican?" Contee asked.

There was a pause then the Ensign spoke, "No, sirâ€| The hanger bay is goneâ€| We can't get to the life pods from the bridge as we're cut-offâ€| We've lost communications to most of the ship, so we can't order an evacuationâ€|" the voice trailed off.

Contee swallowed hard as he had to ask the next question as he kept one eye on the status of the advancing Covenant fleet. "Can you carry out the order? Can you self-destruct the ship?" he asked.

"Yes, sir!" came the Ensign's reply, "I'll make sure that they don't take my ship!"

Contee let out an inner sigh of relief because if Ensign Moore couldn't scuttle the Sun and Shadow, then he wouldn't have had any choice but to fire a nuke at the ship to ensure that it wouldn't fall into the enemy's hands. He still felt the guilt over losing that ship and crew, but at least he wasn't forced to destroy it himself. He heard the Ensign's determination to carry out this last order and he felt a surge of pride and sadness. He suddenly found himself wishing that he'd had a chance to meet the Ensign in person.

"Thank you sonâ€|" was all that he could say in response.

The young voice spoke again in a calm quiet tone, "Sirâ€|" there was a pause, "Make sure that the Covenant pays for this."

Contee felt a lump in his throat and it took him a moment to respond, "You have my promiseâ€| The Covenant will pay dearly for this."

"Thank you, sirâ€| This is UNSC Sun and Shadowâ€| Implementing Emergency Priority Order 098831A-1â€| Out!" Ensign Moore said over the communications channel and then the line was cut.

"God Speedâ€|" Contee whispered into the dead communications

channel.

The Captain felt his ship shudder slightly. The report from the sensor station was a mere formality as he already knew that the Moore had successfully carried out his last order of his first command. Contee turned his attention back to saving his ship and the surviving ships of his flotilla as they continued their escape from the advancing Covenant fleet.

In the wake of the flotilla survivors, as they made their way to the perceived safety of the fleet and New Constantinople, floated the debris of the UNSC Sun and Shadowâ€|

12. Ever been on an ODP before?

\*\*CHAPTER TWELVE:\*\*

\*\*Ever been on an ODP before?\*\*

\*\*Covenant CSO-class Supercarrier Glorious Devotion  
>New Constantinople System<br>August 14, 2536 â€“ 2005 Zulu Time\*\*

Fleet Master Duran 'Korahee studied the tactical display, at his station on the bridge of his flagship, showing the disposition of the ships of his task force that had emerged from Slipspace. His initial feelings of frustration and impatience were slowly subsiding as his fighters had easily destroyed two of the human's frigate class ships and had heavily damaged the other three as they fled back to the false safety of their planet in this system.

The task force that had been dispatched to reinforce the first invasion force had formed up into their echelons and was now advancing across the system to the planet the humans inhabited. The Fleet Master's first impulse was to rush in to do battle and quickly overwhelm the human defenders, but the tactical scans and reports from the first invasion force reported that the humans had defense platforms in orbit around this planet which was unlike anything the Covenant had faced in their previous attacks and destruction of other human colonies.

This must be an important world to the humans if it rates such a defense, 'Korahee mused to himself as he contemplated his strategy to deal with the human defenses and fulfill his duty â€“ his imperative â€“ to exterminate all humans on this world.

From the tactical sensor scans and reports from the previous invasion, the Fleet Master knew that these defense platforms would be difficult targets to destroy as they carried as heavy or even heavier weapons than the human's largest ships. The Fleet Master turned to the Sangheili warrior who was manning the ship's communication console, "Inform the task force to move closer togetherâ€| I want to project a small front on our approach to this planet."

As the order was acknowledged and sent out to the rest of the ships in the task force, Ship Master 'Doravee approached the Fleet Master, upon hearing the commands being given as it gave him some concern.

"Fleet Master! Are you sure about the task force assuming this formation? Won't this make it easier for the humans to target and hit our ships with their kinetic cannons? We won't have much room to maneuver to avoid the human's fire." the Ship Master said using his respectful tone.

The Fleet Master was about to rebuke the Ship Master for his insolence in questioning his methods, but then remembered that the Ship Master had suggested launching the fighters against the group of human ships earlier and causing them much destruction and damage. The Fleet Master held back his temper as he would instruct the Ship Master on the tactics that were being employed and also re-emphasize why he was the Fleet Master and 'Doravee was still only a Ship Master.

"'Doravee! You've seen the scans of this human world have you not?" 'Korahée asked.

The Ship Master nodded his acknowledgement that he had seen those scans.

The Fleet Master continued on with his explanation, "Then you are aware that the humans have orbital defense constructs around the planet! These defense constructs carry heavy weapons, but have limited movement! We must approach on a narrow front to minimize our exposure to those platforms. Only a small number of the platforms will be able to engage us at one time. We will still take losses, but they will be less than if we tried to come in on a broad front. Those platforms that we do not engage initially, we can destroy at our leisure once we have destroyed the human's fleet in this system! Plus I have several tricks to throw at the humans that they will not be expecting. Do you understand! No?"

The Ship Master nodded in understanding and started to turn around to head to his bridge station, when the Fleet Master spoke up again causing 'Doravee to turn back and look at his fleet commander.

"'Doravee! If you ever question my commands again! I will have you gutted and ejected into space from an air-lock! Do I make myself clear?" the Fleet Master said in a low menacing growl.

Ship Master 'Doravee bowed his head deeply to show that he understood the threat his commander had given him.

The Covenant task force closed up and continued its advance towards the planet and it's waiting human defenders.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

\*\*UNSC Fleet Command HQ  
>Antioch, New Constantinople<br>August 14, 2536 â€“ 2015 Zulu Time\*\*

Whitcomb stared at the holographic display showing the disposition of his fleet units and the approaching Covenant fleet. He tried to understand and figure out what the alien commander was thinking and doing, so that he could react to it. It was hard trying to think like an alien commander, but there are several universal constants that applied and that made it easier for him to try and develop a counter

strategy to the alien's attack. Whitcomb had briefly considered taking a Pelican up to his flagship, but at this time he needed all the intel and communication equipment to co-ordinate the planet wide defense, so he was tied, for the moment, to his planet-side HQ.

Every sensor on every UNSC ship and orbital defense platform was feeding real-time information to the computer systems in Fleet HQ and that information was being displayed and updated on the holographic display that Whitcomb was staring hard at. The Vice-Admiral saw how the Covenant fleet seemed to be merging closer together and bunching up into a closed-in wedge formation. This brought a concerned frown to his face as he realized that the Covenant enemy commander was minimizing his exposure to the ODPs and their weapons. The Vice-Admiral would need to react fast and adjust as the enemy fleet would be in range in the next fifteen minutes.

Whitcomb spoke up without taking his eyes off the holographic display, "Commander Wrightâ€œ! Order the carriers Georgia, Oregon and Ontario to withdraw with their escorts and take position on the far side of the moon. They are to launch their Longsword squadrons to conduct harassing strikes on the Covenant fleet's left flankâ€œ! He hoped that this maneuver might cause the Covenant to break formation to chase down the carriers and get them in the firing arcs of the other ODPs. Either way this was going to get messy and ugly for everyone involved.

The Vice-Admiral turned to the communication station, "Have all Marine and ground units been alerted?" he asked.

"Yes, sirâ€œ! All units report either already in position or moving into defensive positions." replied the communication technician.

"Have all civil-defense units been alerted as well?" asked the Vice-Admiral.

"Yes, sirâ€œ! The warning has gone out on all civilian channels and civil-defense units are reporting they are ready and standing by."

The Vice-Admiral grimaced as he thought of what was going to happen to all the civilians on New Constantinople if he failed to stop the Covenant attack, "Commander Wrightâ€œ!" Whitcomb said as he stood up and turned away momentarily from the holographic display table.

"Sir?" replied the Commander.

"I want you to send the command to execute evacuation plan EXODUS-THREEâ€œ!" the Vice-Admiral said in a matter of fact tone.

Commander Wright took a moment as he had thought he had misheard the Vice-Admiral and then he spoke up, "Sir? Are you sure that you want to execute EXODUS-THREE?" he asked trying to not show his surprise and concern in his voice, "This could cause wide-spread panic among the civilian population and we don't even know where the Covenant will landâ€œ! if they do land." the Commander added.

The Vice-Admiral looked grimly at his chief of staff and spoke in a low voice that only the Commander could hear, "Jamesâ€| The Covenant are going to break through our defensesâ€| The question is how badly we're going to maul them as they break through. Knowing how the Covenant have operated in the past, they're going to go for the cities first to glass them and I'll be damned if I don't give the civilians a chance and not leave them helpless in those deathtraps."

Wright was taken aback by the Vice-Admiral's use of his first name and the tone he was using, "But, sirâ€| moving all those civilians to the evacuation pointsâ€| We just don't have the logistics to move and support them." he replied remembering to keep his tone low.

Whitcomb sighed as a sad faraway look crossed his eyes, "We have to face the truth, Jamesâ€| we're not going to get everyone off this planet, but we have to give them at least a chance. We'll move Marine units into the cities and fight the Covenant there. The longer we can bog them down in the cities the more people we can evacuate."

The Commander nodded grimly as he understood and knew what the Vice-Admiral was saying was the truth, "I'll send the orders out right away, sir. We can at least start with the people already in the evacuation centersâ€| We have the troop transport ships and we can use those warships that aren't able fight in the evacuation." Wright said.

Whitcomb nodded to his chief of staff. The Vice-Admiral turned, once again looking at the holographic display and the icons representing the Covenant fleet as they continued their advance. There were only minutes before the ODPs would be able to attain target lock. The Covenant would be able to return fire with their plasma cannons, but the ODPs were designed to take the punishment and his ships could maneuver somewhat. But yet something was nagging at the back of Whitcomb's mind. The Covenant commander was advancing and bunching his ships together. They appeared that they were just going to advance into the defenses. Nothing fancy just straight in.

Either that Covenant commander is so sure of his tech advantage and doesn't think much of us or he's got something up his sleeve, Whitcomb thought as he tried to think like the alien commander and try to anticipate what was going to happen.

Vice-Admiral Whitcomb turned towards the communication station in the command center, where Commander Wright was at the moment sending out the commands to start executing the evacuation plans. "Commander Wrightâ€| Alert Alpha Company to be on standby to deploy and when you have a moment, I want you to get on the horn to our Spartan friendâ€| I want him on a Pelican and in orbit ASAPâ€| I want him stationed on one of the Mark II ODPs."

Wright looked at his commander with a puzzled look, "Sir? I'm not sure I understand?"

"Just make it so Commander. I'm hoping that my bad feeling is just that. But I want a Spartan in place in case things go sideways on us." Whitcomb said in an almost prophetic tone.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

\*\*UNSC Firebase Mitchell

>August 14, 2536 " 2023 Zulu Time<strong>

Michael was sprinting for the landing pad, seeing the Pelican waiting for him there. He could hear the engines of the dropship whining at a high pitch as it readied for an emergency takeoff once he was aboard.

All around him, the firebase was in a frantic upheaval of activity as troops and equipment were being prepared for battle and moving out to prepared defensive positions. Michael had been catching up on some much needed rest after his ONI mission when the alert sounded that the Covenant had returned. He overheard other soldiers talk and there was much speculation and rumor over what was happening, but no real information had been released other than Covenant forces had returned. Michael didn't pay much attention to the rumor mill, but if the Covenant had returned then it was serious, no matter what numbers and disposition they were in.

Michael had been suiting up in the base's armory, when the call had come in from Commander Wright for him to get up to one of the ODPs in orbit. He'd been at first puzzled by the request as he thought he would be more useful here on the ground. That was until the Commander informed him that this order had come straight from the Vice-Admiral. Michael immediately pushed away any doubts and hesitations, making sure that he had loaded up on ammo and grenades as he made his way to the base's landing pad. The Commander had informed him that a Pelican would be waiting on the pad to transport him up to an Orbital Defense Platform " designation Whiskey-Tango-004.

He boarded the waiting Pelican, barely sitting down as the dropship dusted off, roaring up into the sky. As the Pelican continued accelerating and climbing into orbit to dock with the ODP, Michael checked his weapons. As he went through his ritual, his mind took a moment to wonder, hoping that Barton Jackson and his family made it to the evacuation center. He had a momentary feeling of guilt if he had told Jackson to take his family to Antioch only to find themselves trapped there with the Covenant attacking.

Any further thoughts or feelings of guilt were pushed aside as Michael heard one of the Pelican pilots suddenly exclaim "Jesus! the ODPs are opening up!"

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Ensign Hamilton was still at his station in the CIC, directing the ODP's systems and coordinating defensive fire with the other ODPs that could target on the approaching Covenant fleet. Commander Hanson who commanded the ODP had entered the CIC quickly, going directly to his station, but seeing that the Ensign seemed to have everything in control did not immediately relieve or take over from him. Hamilton had taken that as a vote of confidence from his commander and felt a surge of pride, but that feeling quickly disappeared as he looked at the main display board. He had to push down a growing sick feeling building in his stomach as he saw the number and type of Covenant ships that appeared to be heading directly for the point in space that his ODP occupied. He pushed aside those feelings of fear down as the tech manning the weapons station reported.

"Covenant fleet has entered effective MAC firing range! We are

starting to get target locks."

Hamilton took only a moment as he looked at Commander Hanson and saw the commander nod to him. He spoke over his headset, so that the crew in the CIC and his opposite numbers in the other ODPs could hear him. "Mark II's will target and engage the larger Covenant shipsâ€| Mark I's target and engage the screening shipsâ€| Commence fire on my markâ€| Mark!"

Hamilton felt the Iron Bitch shudder as its MAC Cannon fired its huge projectile at tremendous velocities towards the oncoming Covenant ships. Maneuvering thrusters on the ODP quickly fired to re-orient the ODP back into position while another round was loaded and the cannon vented and recharged to fire.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

"Sir, the ODPs are engaging Covenant ships." Wright said as he looked up from his tablet that was streaming real-time information from the ODPs and the UNSC ships in orbit.

Whitcomb nodded as he heard the report, "Have the ODPs continue to engageâ€| The fleet will hold its fire until the Covenant is closer inâ€| Longswords from the carriers will go in first and then the rest of the fleet will open fireâ€| Understood?" he ordered.

Commander Wright nodded his understanding and sent the appropriate orders out to the fleet to prepare to engage.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The Fleet Master's eyes narrowed as he looked at the display screen and checked the status of his task force. As he watched another icon representing one of his heavy destroyers went dark indicating it had either been made immobile from damage or the more likely explanation was that it had been destroyed.

"Fleet Masterâ€| We have lost nine destroyersâ€| five cruisersâ€| and one battlecruiserâ€| At least twenty ships reporting different degrees of damage." the Sangheili manning communications reported.

"Status on the enemy ships?" ordered the Fleet Master.

"Their ships appear to be holding positionâ€| It appears they are waiting until we get closer before engaging us, Fleet Master." reported the sensor station.

"Do we have target locks on any of the enemy ships or his weapon's platforms?" the Fleet Master asked anxiously.

"We are just entering range and are acquiring target locks, Fleet Master!" reported the Sangheili at the weapons station.

'Korahée paused for a moment as he again considered his strategic options and the plan that he had devised. "Continue the advance! Have the task force target the enemy ships only! Not the defense platforms!" he ordered.

The Sangheili at communications was puzzled as were all the bridge

crew at the Fleet Master's order. The warrior manning communications looked over to the Ship Master catching his eye. 'Doravee paused and momentarily considered questioning the Fleet Master's orders, but remembering 'Korahee's threat and knowing that the Fleet Master would certainly carry out the threat caused him to hold his questions and doubts for now. 'Doravee just nodded back to the warrior as the commands were sent out to the rest of the task force.

'Korahee heard his commands being sent out as he continued watching the display screen as his task force narrowed the range with the humans. Another icon went dark as the Fleet Master kept his gaze locked on the display.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael could see the darkness of space light up through the cockpit of the Pelican as the ODPs fired their Magnetic Accelerated Cannons. The MAC rounds left streaks of light against the darkness as they were hurtled at the Covenant ships. He felt the Pelican slow down as it adjusted its approach to the hangar bay of the ODP. It was a bit of a tricky approach for the dropship as the ODP moved with every MAC shot and thrusters fired to keep it in its orbital position.

He was still trying to figure out why he'd been ordered up to the ODP as the Pelican touchdown in the hangar bay and he waited for the loading ramp to lower. Before the ramp had even finished lowering, he could hear the frantic movement and noise in the hanger bay as the ODP's hanger bay crew worked frantically as their station engaged the enemy.

As he exited the Pelican and looked around the hanger bay, he felt a little out of sorts. He had only been given the general order to get up to the ODP, but nothing more than that by Commander Wright.

Michael was trying to figure out his next move when a young, but very determined looking officer approached him and stopped coming to attention in front of him.

"Sierra-113â€| I'm Lieutenant Grantâ€| I'm in charge of the Iron Bitch's marine detachment."

Michael came to attention and saluted the Lieutenant, "Sirâ€| I'm here at the Vice-Admiral's orders, but I have no idea why." he said trying to not sound like a confused raw recruit.

The Lieutenant got a small smirk, "Well from the orders I received from Fleet HQ, you're to be assigned to my detachment and help defend the ODP."

The Lieutenant paused and then shrugged, "I knowâ€| It doesn't make much sense, but orders are ordersâ€| Let's get moving and we'll get you squared away."

Grant turned and headed for the bulkhead door to exit the hangar bay. Michael followed the Lieutenant out. As they walked, the station would shudder on a regular basis, indicating that the MAC cannon was still firing at the Covenant.

"Have you ever been on an ODP before?" the Lieutenant asked as they walked.

"No, sirâ€| But I have studied and I am familiar with the layouts of ODPs." Michael replied.

"Well being on an actual ODP and studying a floor plan are two different things. Stick closeâ€| There are too many things on these stations that can hurt or kill youâ€| Understood?"

"Yes, sirâ€|" Michael replied as the two soldiers walked down the ODP's corridor.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

"Seventeen confirmed kills, sir!" Commander Wright reported finding it hard to keep the excitement out of his voice.

"Thank you, Commander." Whitcomb responded in a subdued tone. He continued staring at the holographic display that showed his fleet and orbital defense platforms as they currently tore into the approaching Covenant fleet.

Commander Wright saw the Vice-Admiral's mood and was puzzled, "Sir? You should be happy about thisâ€| We're tearing the Covenant a new one and we haven't lost a ship yet."

The Vice-Admiral turned, looking at the Commander, as a small smirk appeared looking somewhat out of place on his serious somber face, "You would think I would be happy, but the Covenant are acting strangely. They are just advancing into our gunsâ€| taking heavy damage. Something doesn't feel right about this whole situation."

The tech manning the communications station called out, "Sirâ€| The Covenant are firing."

Whitcomb nodded as he knew that the time of no losses was about to endâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Space between the two fleets became a maelstrom as MAC rounds streaked towards Covenant ships and plasma torpedoes now responded back towards the defending UNSC ships that were acting as a shield to cover the ODPs. Ships exploded as they were hitâ€| Air ventedâ€| Crews died as they were crushed, burnt, asphyxiated and sucked out or exposed to the vacuum of space.

The Covenant continued their advance towards New Constantinople and the human defensesâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Fleet Master 'Korahee looked with satisfaction at the display screen as he could see the results of his task force's plasma fire and that it was causing heavy destruction among the humans. He looked up from the display screen and saw the Ship Master with a grim look in his eyes.

"You disapprove of my tactics Ship Master?" 'Korahee said in a questioning tone that held no anger at the moment.

'Doravee bowed his head respectfully, "Fleet Masterâ€œ! Even though we are causing heavy damage among the human ships now. We have lost or had damaged nearly a third of our deployed task force. We have still not fired on the defense platforms and they continue to do the most damage among out shipsâ€œ'"

'Doravee was going to say more, but he was suddenly interrupted by the Sangheili manning the sensor station.

"We have enemy fighters coming in!"

The Fleet Master didn't hesitate, "Launch our fighters to intercept!" he ordered.

Covenant fighters quickly scrambled and launched to intercept and engage the human fighters. Soon the space around the Covenant task force was filled with human and Covenant fighters engaging and jockeying for position. Fighters from both sides started to die adding to the scene of destruction as the Covenant ships continued their advance.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

"Sir, our fighter squadrons are engaging." Commander Wright reported.

Whitcomb nodded that he had heard the Commander's report as he continued looking at the holographic display. "Fleet status?" he asked.

A grim look appeared on the Commander's face, "Covenant plasma fire did a lot of damageâ€œ! We've lost ten ships. Another eighteen reporting varying degrees of damage." he reported.

"Commanderâ€œ! Get the lame ducks out of thereâ€œ;have them retreat to effect repairs." the Vice-Admiral ordered.

Wright nodded as he sent the appropriate orders out to the fleet.

"Status of ODPs?" Whitcomb asked.

"No damageâ€œ! They are continuing their fire." responded the Commander.

"No damage?" Whitcomb said hit with a worried puzzled feeling as he turned towards the Commander.

"Yes, sir. It appears that the Covenant are only shooting at our ships. They're leaving our ODPs aloneâ€œ;for now." Wright responded with some puzzlement now entering his voice as well.

\_Damn! What the hell are the Covenant up to? Why are they ignoring our ODPs?\_ Whitcomb thought furiously as he tried to figure out what he was missing.

His thoughts were interrupted as Wright looked at his tablet as another update came through, "Sirâ€œ! Our ships are now engaging the Covenant."

### 13. Dark Country

\*\*CHAPTER THIRTEEN:\*\*

\*\*Dark Country\*\*

\*\*Evacuation Center #5

>Antioch, New Constantinople<br>August 14, 2536 â€“ 2030 Zulu Time\*\*

On the outside everything appeared normal, but there was an undercurrent of panic and chaos hanging over the evacuation center. Barton Jackson struggled to keep his family together as they navigated through the crush of humanity that pushed and pulled at them. After the "visit" to his home by the UNSC and his having ratted out the insurgency, Barton didn't waste any time waking his wife and kids, packing just what they could carry quickly and catching the first available transport to Antioch.

Susan had first been concerned by her husband's erratic behavior. It was only when their son, Dylan, blurted out how Daddy and the "robot" were meeting to help the UNSC fight the aliens that she had almost lost control, falling into a blind panic. Barton finally managed to calm her enough to explain what had happened and that he'd had no choice but to talk. He explained that the UNSC was making the arrangements for all them to get off New Constantinople and back to Reach, from there they could disappear.

"Are you sure that they'll keep their promise and get us off planet and just not hang us out to dry?" It is the UNSC we're talking about here." Susan said filled with fear, worry and concern for her family.

"Yeahâ€| I know there's a risk and I know it's the UNSC, but this robotâ€|man or whatever it was. I believe he'll keep his word. He'll get us off planet. I know it!" Barton said firmly to not only convince her, but to reassure himself as well.

It was late morning by the time they arrived in Antioch and it didn't take long to find their way to the closest evacuation center that was processing civilian refugees that had been displaced by the Covenant invasion and who wanted to leave the system. They found themselves waiting in line for hours and it didn't take long before the children got hungry and cranky from the standing around and waiting. They finally made it to the counter and at first the refugee worker helping them couldn't find any record for them with clearance for evacuation. Jackson tried to fight back the growing despair as he suddenly had doubts wondering what he had dragged Susan and the kids into.

Maybe it's not too late to head back home, pack up and head into the hills to hide...\_

Jackson was trying to figure out what to do next when his thoughts were interrupted by the refugee worker behind the counter.

"Sorry for the mix up. I found your paperwork, it was filed under our pending section. Okayâ€| I have priority evacuation clearance for one Barton Jackson and three persons. That would be your wife and

children I take it?" the refugee worker said with a smile on her face.

Jackson released a deep sigh of relief, finding he could barely speak from being so wound up with the stress and tension of everything that had happened in the last few hours. He nodded repeatedly as he hastily signed his name on the electronic tablet. They didn't have to wait long for another refugee worker to come along and escort him and his family into another area. This was different from the line they had been waiting in, this area was set aside for those that had been cleared for evacuation to rest and wait. Barton looked over the area, refugee workers were handing out food and water and activity areas had been setup for the numerous children to play in so they weren't running loose in the evacuation area. There was even UNSC military police deployed to protect the area and to keep control and order over the area to ensure that there were no incidents.

It didn't take long for Jackson and his family to find a place where they could sit down and rest. They were now finally able to relax somewhat. Susan took the kids to an activity area so that they could play and burn off some energy. Jackson watched from a distance as Dylan ran around with the other children while Susan kept Diana with her, keeping an eye on Dylan. Jackson could feel the tiredness pull at him and he decided to indulge himself as he closed his eyes to try and grab some rest.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Jackson was startled out of his rest as alarms went off throughout the evacuation center. His first thought was that the alarms had something to do with him, but then the display screens on the walls around the center started displaying news that Covenant ships had re-entered the system and that all military and civil defense units were being mobilized. At hearing that the Covenant had returned, he found a part of himself wishing that the alarms had been about him.

The refugee workers and the UNSC military police tried to keep everyone in the evacuation center calm, but the lack of news about the Covenant attack only fed rumors which led to people starting to panic at the unknown. Rumors flowed through the evacuation centerâ€| The Covenant had already landedâ€| The UNSC fleet had been destroyedâ€| The UNSC had surrendered the planet to save the populationâ€| Each rumor caused the hundreds of people in the center to become more agitated and restless.

Jackson made sure that Susan and the kids all stayed close together as his survival instincts kicked into full gear. He moved quickly around the evacuation center gathering a small cache of food and water that he and Susan could carry. It wasn't a lot but it was better than having nothing.

As situation continued on, Jackson kept an eye on the crowd in the center. The situation was being maintained and controlled for now, but it was starting to fray around the edges as he could see the crowd getting more restless as each minute passed by. He was wondering what would happen next when he saw it. He caught the worried looks between the refugee workers. His worry increased as he saw the whispering among them along with the anxious looks and conversations with the military police. He could feel the bad feeling

growing in his gut, it only got worse as an announcement came over the speaker system in the evacuation center.

"Due to the Covenant attack, UNSC Command has initiated orders for planet wide evacuation. All cities are to be evacuated. All civilians in evacuation centers will be transported to protected zones for evacuation. Please stand by for further instructions."

The announcement immediately set the refugees off. The fear and stress had already taken its toll on the people, most of who were fleeing the earlier fighting. It wasn't long before shouting started to get louder as the fear of not knowing and of being left behind took hold of the crowd.

Barton turned to his wife, "Make sure you and the kids stay close! I think it's going to get ugly!" he said in a low worried tone, looking into his wife's eyes.

Susan nodded her understanding as she hugged the kids closer to her as she tried to keep her own worry and fear in control.

Jackson could see tempers start to flare as people started pushing and jostling in the center. Groups of refugees were starting to argue with the refugee workers and amongst themselves. It didn't take long for a couple of fist fights to break out. Fortunately the military police were quick to jump on those fights, breaking them up to keep them from spreading.

What sounded like a loud roar coming from outside caused Barton to turn and look back towards the entrance. He could see crowds of people, the people who had been outside waiting to be processed, were now trying to push their way into the center. They were afraid of being left behind and as the panic grew the crowd outside thought that their only way to safety was inside. The crowds were barely being held back by the small contingent of military police guarding the entrance. Barton knew that it was only a matter of time before things got worse.

Just then a platoon of marines in full combat armor came into the evacuation center through a rear entrance, things were getting worse. People scrambled to get out of their way or they were pushed aside as the marines cleared a path through the crowd without stopping, as they made their way to the entrance and the growing out of control mob outside. Normally Barton would have been upset over the heavy-handed tactics by the UNSC, but at this particular time he found he couldn't be mad at the marines. This situation warranted these tactics as the people were getting caught up in the fear and "reasonable" dialog wasn't going to defuse this situation.

Jackson watched, with some detached fascination, as the marines quickly and expertly deployed at the entrance, reinforcing the military police guards. As he continued watching, his attention drifted to the officer in charge of the platoon. He saw the officer talking to some of the refugee workers and was surprised when he saw one of the workers turn and point in his direction. Before he could react, the marine officer looked in his direction and made direct eye contact with him, before he could avoid it.

Jackson felt panic starting to grow in him as he quickly looked in

another direction, breaking eye contact with the officer. His mind started telling him that something was going wrong. His eyes darted around the evacuation center and he saw no easy exit out of there â€“ he was trapped with no way out. The panic and fear continued to grow as thoughts raced through his head â€“ he would be arrested and hauled away, with his wife and kids left on their own with the Covenant invading the planet.

His mind tried to fight against the panic and fear, trying to find some way out. He glanced back in the officer's direction and his panic and fear grew exponentially as he saw the officer, accompanied by four heavily armed marines, heading in his direction. Barton kept nervously glancing as the soldiers pushed their way through the crowds closer to him and his family. He toyed with and immediately dismissed the idea of sprinting for one of the exits. What about Susan and the kids? He couldn't and wouldn't run out on them.

He found himself resigning himself to his fate as the soldiers got closer. His main fears and worries were now for Susan and the kids. Thoughts swirled through his head.

\_Maybe I can beg for mercy for themâ€\_|\_

Any further thoughts were cut-off as the marine officer stopped in front of him, giving him a good long up and down look, "Are you Barton Jackson?" the officer asked.

Jackson felt completely drained and couldn't find the strength to fight what was going to happen. He nodded as he meekly resigned himself to his fate and his fears.

"These marines will escort you and your family to the shuttle padâ€| Grab your things and get movingâ€| We don't have a lot of time." the officer said using a professional and commanding tone.

It took what seemed like a full minute for what the officer had said to sink into Jackson's brain. All he could do was stare dumbfounded at the officer, "H-Huh?" was all that came from his mouth.

The officer felt his impatience grow at having to explain himself more than once, but he managed to maintain his composure at the realization that he was talking to civilians and not marines, "You and your family have priority clearanceâ€| There's a shuttle leaving right now for a transport in low orbitâ€| I don't know who you know, but they're high up enough to make room for youâ€| So let's get moving now!"

Jackson found himself frozen in shock as this was the last thing he'd expected. Susan quickly jumped in taking control, "Thank you, sirâ€| Thank youâ€| she said as she hastily got the children and grabbed their few belongings. She reached out and grabbed her husband, shaking him out of his stupor, passing their bags to him.

Jackson, still in a daze, followed his wife as she took charge, carrying Diana in one arm and holding on to Dylan's hand with the other. The family closely followed the marines as they pushed through the crowd to the doorway to the shuttle pad. Dylan was mesmerized by the huge and serious looking marines as they exited the evacuation center on to the shuttle pad.

True to the officer's word, there was a shuttle waiting with its engines whining and a crew member waving frantically for the family to board. Dylan was wrapped up in the whole adventure even turning and saluting the marines. This actually elicited some half smiles from the marines with one of them even returning a salute to the young boy.

Jackson was still feeling numb and drained, but even in that condition at that moment he saw how young these serious and deadly looking marines actually were.

\_Jesusâ€| Those marines don't even look like they're old enough to shave\_, he thought as he and his family hurriedly boarded the shuttle. The shuttle crew quickly helped the family find seats and got them strapped in. They were barely settled when the shuttle took off to rendezvous with the transport in orbitâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

\*\*UNSC Fleet Command HQ  
>Antioch, New Constantinople<br>August 14, 2536 â€" 2055 Zulu Time\*\*

Vice-Admiral Whitcomb looked grim faced as he stared at the holographic display and saw the real-time output of the battle occurring in space. The ships of his fleet had started engaging the Covenant ships. The fighter strike, he'd ordered had already gone in and done some damage, but the Covenant had quickly responded by deploying their fighters â€" blunting any advantage and extra damage that could have been inflicted by the fighter strike. Reports coming in had the fleet taking brutal damage from the Covenant plasma fire, but between the fleet and the ODPs they were giving back as good as they were getting.

That was what was bothering Whitcomb. All reports from the battle had the Covenant ships only firing on the fleet, leaving the ODPs unmolested, while they continued advancing on the planet. This strange behavior bothered the Vice-Admiral, because if he was the attacking commander he wouldn't have ignored the ODPs â€" he would have found a way of neutralizing or taking them out. Whitcomb felt his worry and unease grow that maybe the Covenant had something up their sleeve. He resigned himself that he would just have to wait until the enemy showed their hand and he would be forced to react to it.

The space around New Constantinople was filled with streaks of light caused by MAC rounds from the UNSC and the plasma torpedoes from the Covenant. With the UNSC fleet heavily engaged, along with their MAC rounds, they now added to the deadly destructive firework show by firing nuclear tipped SHIVA missiles. Small suns flared into existence and disappeared in seconds as the nukes detonated against Covenant shields. Ships from both sides exploded, more crews died. The Covenant continued their advanceâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

\*\*Covenant CSO-class Supercarrier Glorious Devotion  
>August 14, 2536 â€" 2100 Zulu Time<strong>

The supercarrier shuddered as a nuke detonated and flared against her

shields. Fleet Master 'Korahee maintained his balance as he continued to watch his tactical display and take in the details of the ongoing battle. He knew that his task force had taken heavy damage and losses, but he also knew that he had dealt the human fleet tremendous damage as well. He had continued to ignore the human's defense platforms for now, but that was soon to end.

'Korahee looked up and turned towards the communication station, "Prepare to send the signal along with the navigation co-ordinates to the rest of the task force on my commandâ€| Once they have emerged from Slipspace and formed up our ships will launchâ€| Understood?"

"Yes, Fleet Masterâ€| Understood." replied the Sangheili at the communications station.

'Korahee's eyes took on a predatory gleam in anticipation of what he was going to unleash on the humans.

\_Soon the human defenses will be destroyed and then the work of cleansing this planet of the human defilers can beginâ€|\_

"Executeâ€|" the Fleet Master said as his eyes gleamed with the thoughts of death and destructionâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

\*\*Valiant-class super-heavy cruiser UNSC Presidio  
>August 14, 2536 â€" 2105 Zulu Time<strong>

"Report!?" Captain Kwong ordered as his ship shuddered.

"We took a glancing hit on the forward sectionâ€| port sideâ€| armor is holding." the damage control officer quickly reported as the information flashed on his screen.

"MAC status?" Kwong asked.

"Everything is green, sir." replied the weapons officer.

"Maintain fireâ€|" Kwong ordered.

Kwong was about to ask for an update on the status of his task force when a cry went out from the crewman manning the sensor station.

"Sir! I'm picking high energy space distortions!"

"Where and what is it?" Kwong asked with an anxious tone in his voice.

"It's about 2000 kilometers off our starboarâ€" SLIPSPACE POINT FORMING!" yelled the sensor tech as he couldn't control the excitement and fear in his voice.

Captain Kwong could only look in helplessness as a Slipspace emergence point formed and Covenant ships started to appearâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

"My godâ€| "

Whitcomb heard Commander Wright mutter to himself and he found himself sharing the exact same sentiment, but he wasn't allowed the luxury to express himself openly due to his rank.

\_So that's what the Covenant had up their sleeve\_, the Vice-Admiral thought as he tried to maintain his composure and adapt and counter this unexpected bold move by the Covenant.

"Status and composition of Covenant force?" Whitcomb asked.

"Sensors are showingâ€| Jesusâ€| Fifty targetsâ€| Thirty-Five targets classified as SDV-class heavy corvettesâ€| Fifteen targets classified as CPV-class heavy destroyersâ€|" Commander Wright reported with a grim look on his face.

\_Thank god for small favorsâ€| At least these fifty ships are lighter class ships and not more battlecruisers and supercarriers\_, Whitcomb thought but still grim faced as he now had fifty more enemy ships that just suddenly appeared on his flank.

"Commanderâ€| Have the ODPs redirect their fire on this newest threatâ€| The fleet will continue to engage the primary Covenant forceâ€| Get the carriers to adjust their position and send in a fighter strike ASAPâ€| Also let the carrier group commander know that he may have to release his escort ships to engage the Covenantâ€|" Whitcomb ordered in an almost calm tone.

"Sir!" one of the techs manning a sensor station shouted trying to catch the attention of the command staff.

"What is it?" the Vice-Admiral asked almost not wanting to hear more bad news.

"We're picking up multiple launches from both groups of Covenant ships?" reported the tech.

"Is it a fighter strike?" Whitcomb asked.

"Sirâ€| The targets are larger and slower than fightersâ€| Sensors are classifying all the targets as Phantom dropshipsâ€|"

It was hard for Whitcomb to maintain a calm exterior and it took all of his self-control not to yell and swear as he realized how the Covenant were going to deal with his ODPs.

"Warn all ODPs immediatelyâ€| Tell them to prepare to repel boarders!" Whitcomb ordered in an urgent tone.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Captain Kwong could only watch with detached fascination as the Phantom dropships flew at full speed through the UNSC fleet. The fleet had been caught off balance by this unexpected move by the enemy. The fleet had reacted quickly and Archer missiles along with point defense weapons tried to engage the large number of Phantoms. A large number of the dropships were destroyed by the defensive fire,

but it was a game of numbers. They had caught the UNSC off balance and more got through than were destroyed as they streaked towards the ODPs. The ODPs carried point defense weapon systems, but not enough to deal with the numbers coming at them. Some of the dropships would get through.

On the ODPs, crews moved at a frantic pace as weapons were hastily handed out as word quickly spread of what was comingâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The shuttle that Barton and his family were on finally made orbit and it wasn't long before it docked with the civilian transport ship \_UNSC Journey,\_ which had been requisitioned for use in helping with the evacuation of New Constantinople. The \_Journey\_ had waited in low orbit to rendezvous with all the evacuation shuttles. Once the last shuttle had docked, the ship quickly made ready to leave orbit and head for a Slipspace jump point to head further back into UNSC space and safety.

The transport had been squeezed to capacity with civilians as everyone jockeyed for a place to claim. It was going to be a long trip back to Reach, for most of the passengers, as there were only a limited number of stasis pods which would require a large number of the refugees to remain awake for the trip. Fortunately the UNSC had made sure that the ship had been provisioned with enough supplies for the trip.

Jackson and his family finally found a place to settle down on the observation deck. They had a spectacular view of space around New Constantinople. Dylan was mesmerized by the view as he had never been in space before. It would have been a majestic and enjoyable view if it wasn't for the streaks of lights, explosions and mini-suns flaring in the distance where the UNSC was desperately fighting off the Covenant.

Jackson found himself staring at the distant battle and his thoughts drifted to the young marines that had escorted him and his family to the shuttle. The thought and realization that those explosions in space were ships and on those ships were young men and women, fighting to protect people â€“ families like his.

He was brought out of his thoughts as Dylan tugged on his arm causing him to stop where his thoughts had been taking him. Back in the moment, Jackson looked at his son and saw that he was pointing off in another direction.

"Daddy lookâ€|" Dylan said.

Jackson turned to the direction that his son was pointing and was taken aback by the scene. The transport was passing by a UNSC frigate that had been damaged in the fighting and evidently had been forced to withdraw. Jackson and the other people on the observation deck could only stare at how much damage the frigate had suffered. The outer armor was scorched and there were whole sections of the ship that had been blasted and exposed to space. It was obvious that the ship had taken a pounding and everyone was amazed that the ship was still in one piece let alone under power and moving.

Jackson could barely make out the name of the ship through the scorched and burnt armor " FFG 312 - UNSC Dark Country.

The transport quickly passed and started to leave the UNSC frigate behind as the ship gained velocity as it headed for its jump point and safety. A small cheer rang out as an announcement came over the ship's broadcast system, informing all passengers that they would soon be entering Slipspace.

A sense of relief and relaxation started to grow in Jackson, knowing that the ship would soon be safely on its way to Reach. Exhaustion pulled at him and he found his eyes starting to close with the anticipation of sleep growing in him.

Suddenly alarms went off throughout the ship. Jackson's eyes shot open as he looked towards Susan in a panic. They quickly grabbed their children to hold them close as their panic grew at not knowing what was happening.

Another announcement came over the ship's broadcast system, ""Attention! Attention! We are under attack by Covenant fighters! Please remain calm!""

Rather than helping the passengers remain calm, this only caused more fear and panic among them. People started crying and screaming in desperation. Others kept silent, some holding their families and loved ones close while others prayed, but the fear was evident on all their faces. Jackson and Susan looked at each other with a terrible fear in their eyes as they held each other and their children tightly. Jackson could feel the ship start to vibrate, from the strain, as power was increased to the engines. He looked towards the observation window, seeing streaks of light coming closer " he wasn't sure if it was the Covenant fighters coming closer or them shooting at their ship.

Jackson could only look at the signs of approaching death and felt only the failure that he hadn't been able to protect his wife and children. Along with that failure, he got another feeling " it was one of anger and hate. He found his anger and hatred growing at the Covenant for taking away his family's lives and future. He found himself helpless once again to events and he resigned himself to his fate as the streaks of lights came closer. He estimated that there had to be at least eight Covenant fighters coming in for the kill " it was overkill as they only needed one to blow the undefended ship into pieces.

Looking at his wife as he held his son tight to him " hoping it would end quickly " Jackson glanced back towards the observation window and was shocked as two of the streaks turned into explosions, followed by a third explosion. It was at that moment, out of the corner of the observation window, that the passengers could see the battered UNSC frigate moving to intercept and cover the transport so that it could make it to the jump point and escape.

Jackson stood witness as he watched the heavily damaged frigate firing its few operational point defense weapons as it was straining to maneuver to keep itself between the enemy fighters and the defenseless transport. He saw two more Covenant fighters explode which finally caused the remaining fighters to turn their wrath and fire on the frigate. Jackson watched in understanding of what the

Dark Country was trying to do. The battered frigate was drawing the fighters on itself to allow the transport to escape. Dark Country wasn't going to run â€“ it was going to stand and fight and defend those who couldn't defend themselves.

Jackson kept his eyes glued on the scene unfolding outside the observation window. He held his son tightly as huge explosions erupted from the frigate as the Covenant fighters fired on her, yet the frigate continued firing back â€“ refusing to back down or surrender.

Another fighter exploded as more explosions ripped through the frigate. Jackson could only imagine what hell the frigate's surviving crew was going through, yet they continued to fight with the few operational weapons they had left.

Jackson's throat tightened and tears misted in his eyes as he thought of the men and women on that ship â€“ complete strangers that were sacrificing themselves to protect him and his family.

As the transport entered Slipspace, Jackson caught a last glimpse of the frigate. It was burning and appeared to have lost propulsion and was drifting in space, but still a few point defense weapons were continuing to fire in defiance at the remaining Covenant fighters â€“ refusing to back downâ€|refusing to give up.

14. I'll call you back in ten minutesâ€|

\*\*CHAPTER FOURTEEN:\*\*

\*\*I'll call you back in ten minutesâ€|\*\*

\*\*Orbital Defense Platform â€“ Whiskey-Tango-004  
>in orbit around New Constantinople<br>August 14, 2536 â€“ 2115 Zulu Time\*\*

Alarm sirens blared throughout the orbital defense platform. Michael followed Lieutenant Grant and his marine squad as they raced in full combat armor to their defense point. As they moved through the ODP's corridors, Michael could see the ODP's crew rushing to get to stations. He could see how anxious and nervous they looked as they prepared to repel boarders.

Michael and the marine squad arrived at their defense point, which was to defend the CIC and its approach corridors. Lieutenant Grant only had a small defense force on the station. He had deployed his squads to cover off CIC, the hanger bay, engineering section and the MAC cannon. This left Lieutenant Grant only one squad in reserve and he had deployed it in the center of the ODP, so it could be quickly moved to any area to deal with any potential threat. Michael didn't say anything about the Lieutenant's deployment plans as they seemed sound enough, the only thing he thought he might have done differently was to place himself with the reserve squad to react and respond to any threats. The crew had been given weapons to help with the defense, but Michael considered the navy crew more of a liability in close combat due to their inexperience and lack of training in that area.

Like everyone else, Michael had been caught by surprise with the

Covenant deploying boarding parties to the ODPs, but the more he considered the move the more it seemed to fit into the Elites' nature and desire of engaging in close combat. It was such an outlandish maneuver that he found himself almost admiring the spirit and execution of this attack. This would be a tactic that the UNSC would be reviewing and studying long after this battle had finished.

With the marine squad in position to cover the CIC and Lieutenant Grant receiving confirmation that the other squads were also in their positions, it was now a waiting game for everyone until the Covenant arrived.

Michael listened in as the marines talked over the battlenet communications network. He had also tied in his battle armor's communication system with the ODP's communication net too â€“ he had a feeling that it would be useful to get any information that he could on the bigger picture of what was going on.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Vice-Admiral Whitcomb tried to maintain his composure as he watched his defenses crumble. His eyes stayed locked on the holo-display as he watched his fleet and the Covenant fleet engage in some sort of mutual suicide pact as they continued to tear into each other. He looked at the data streaming in and the realization weighed on him that if he didn't pull the fleet out soon there would be nothing left to pull out.

He had placed his faith in the ODPs to give him the advantage and they had served him well up until the point when the Covenant surprised him with that Slipspace jump of more ships. Maybe he could have even countered that move, but it was the launch of dropships to board the ODPs that was the coup de gras. All he and his command staff could do was helplessly monitor the communications channels of the ODPs, hearing the reports stream in of the Covenant boarding and the desperate fighting taking place on each platform.

The crews were fighting back the best they could with the weapons they had, but if wasn't going to be enough as the desperate cries and shouts of the ODP's crews filled the communication channels as they tried to beat back the onslaught of Covenant troops. There were marines based on each ODP, but they weren't there in the numbers needed to beat back this type of attack. This move by the Covenant â€“ taking horrendous casualties and forcing through to board the ODPs â€“ had never been considered, but it was now happening and Whitcomb was helpless as he continued to hear the com channels ring with the sounds and voices of desperate fighting.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The sounds of fighting echoed down the ODP's corridors. From monitoring the marine's battlenet and the ODP's com system, Michael determined that the heaviest fighting seemed to be occurring in the hanger bay and engineering sections. So far there had been no signs of the fighting moving towards his defensive position, but the stream of wounded being taken to the medical bay provided some hint as to how fierce the fighting was. As he waited, watched the wound go by and listened to the com chatter, Michael could feel his frustration growing. He knew that he should be supporting the marines and crew

that were fighting for their lives. Lieutenant Grant had already refused several of his requests to go and provide support.

He found himself feeling helpless listening to the com channels that were filled with shouts and cries of human defenders fighting and dying. He tried to keep his frustration in control as one unknown person's scared and panicked voice filled the airways.

\_ "T-There's too many of themâ€| I need help! J-Jesus! T-They've got energy swords! I neâ€""\_ the voice was abruptly cut off by a scream with alien shouts filling the channel that Michael recognized as coming from Elites.

The final straw was that the com channel had been left open and he could hear Elites talking. He didn't understand their language, but then he heard the unmistakable sounds of laughter â€" the Elites were laughing as they killed the human defenders.

He snapped having had enough of the situation. He couldn't stand waiting around while people died and the Elites laughed. Michael checked the magazine on his MA5 as he stood up from his defensive position and started walking down the corridor towards the fighting. He passed through the other marine defensive positions, the marines just stared as the Spartan walked past them cradling his assault rifle. A shout rang out from behind him.

"Where the hell do you think you're going!"

Michael recognized Lieutenant Grant's voice, causing him to stop and look back towards the defensive positions. The Lieutenant was moving at a fast walking pace trying to catch up to him. He had what could be only called an unhappy and upset look on his face. Michael turned to face the Lieutenant as he came up and stopped in front of him.

"I saidâ€| Where the hell do you think you're goingâ€| Spartan!?" the anger in his voice was obvious and Grant's face was starting to flush red. The Lieutenant made sure that everyone could hear what he was saying as he called out the Spartan.

Michael didn't immediately respond as he realized he was treading a fine line here. Spartans had a certain amount autonomy in their work and they were not in or under any regular direct command structure, but Michael's current orders had placed him on the ODP and under the command of its officers. Even though he was a Spartan, he was still bound by the same rules and regulations as all other military personnel and right now he was dangerously close to disobeying orders and being insubordinate. Michael actually smirked as he had always pushed his orders and what he could get away with, but this time there were lots of witnesses.

They can only court martial me if I and the witnesses survive, he thought with a fatal sense of pessimism.

Michael saw Lieutenant Grant still giving him an angry look and he decided on his response, "With all due respect Lieutenantâ€| A lot of people are fighting and dying right at this moment and I'm going to go where I'm needed as this position is obviously secure for now."

"Your orders are to stay here and help defend the CIC! You will obey

my orders or I will have you arrested and court martialed!" the Lieutenant replied angrily.

Michael just starred at Grant for what seemed a very long time. He then turned and continued walking down the corridor towards the fighting. The Lieutenant continued his shouting and threats of court martial, but Michael had tuned them out and focused on what lay ahead of him.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

"Sirâ€œ! We're getting reports of heavy fighting on all ODPs in the battle area now. The crews are barely holding on." Commander Wright said as he reported to Vice-Admiral Whitcomb.

Whitcomb gave the holo-display a hard stare as he took in all the information of the on-going battle. He knew that he had to do something to try and save and salvage the situation and what remaining forces he had left. There was a lot of fighting still ahead for all of them.

The Vice-Admiral swallowed as he felt a pain in the back of his head grow. He knew the orders he was about to give would be hard for everyone to take, "Tell the fleet to begin to retreat as per Contingency Plan â€œ Blue-Fourâ€œ! Surviving fleet units will regroup on the far side of the planet using the ODPs on that side to provide cover and support."

Whitcomb looked up from the holo-display and saw Wright's expression of shock and dismay. Whitcomb explained the situation, "I don't think the Covenant will pursue as we have bloodied their nose badly today. They have their opening to begin landings on the planet."

He could see the question forming in the Commander's mind. He beat Wright to the punch before he could ask the question, "â€œ Tell the ODPs that if they cannot retake or hold that they are to abandon and scuttle them to prevent capture and use by Covenant forces. If they can keep fighting they are to continue to do so for as long as possible to inflict as much damage as possible on Covenant fleet units and cover our retiring ships."

"What about those crews, sir?" Wright already knew the answer but his role required that he ask the question for the official record.

"Those crews are expendable nowâ€œ; we've lost this battle. Our main focus now is to keep fighting and buy time so that we can evacuate as many civilians as we can off the planet." Whitcomb replied with no hesitation, but in his mind and soul he could feel the weight and guilt of his decision to write-off the ODP crews.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael found himself engaged in a heavy firefight two decks above the main hanger deck of the ODP. After leaving the defensive position outside the CIC, he made his way down towards the hanger deck. It didn't take long until he "bumped" into Covenant forces advancing up from the hanger deck. A group of eight Grunts came around the corner of one of the corridors, fortunately his motion sensors had picked them up and he had ducked into a side corridor and waited.

He heard them talking and mumbling, as they got closer he disengaged the safety on his MA5. He took a deep breath and jumped out in front of them when they were only several feet from his position. He could see the Grunt's eyes widen as the Spartan surprised them, the Grunts hesitated â€‘ Michael didn't as he pulled the trigger on his assault rifle, opening up on the group. He shredded the lead Grunts, dropping them quickly. The Grunts at the back of the group saw the firing, they managed to get off a couple of wild shots from their plasma pistols, but seeing their comrades get killed, quickly unnerved them. The surviving Grunts tried to flee back down the corridor. Michael quickly shot them down, so they couldn't escape and warn the rest of their force that there was a Spartan aboard.

Michael retraced the route that the Grunts had come from. He only encountered other small groups of Grunts and the occasional Elite that was looking for easy prey, which he easily and quietly disposed of. He also saw evidence of the earlier fighting as he passed through the corridors â€‘ scorched and burnt marks from plasma fire â€‘ evidence of gun fire and blast damage and the blood and bodies of both humans and the Covenant. He finally ran into a large group of Elites two levels from the hanger deck which resulted in a huge firefight occurring in the corridor.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Plasma rifle shots echoed down the corridor. Michael had just peaked out from around the corner of the side corridor, he was taking position up in, when the Elites opened up. He wasn't in any real danger unless a lucky shot managed to catch him. Even though he was safe â€“ for the moment â€“ he still had a large group of Elites down the corridor and that was the direction he needed to go.

\_It can never be easyâ€‘ can it?\_ He thought as he quickly analyzed the situation and tried to come up with a plan of action.

\_Well there's always the direct approach\_, Michael thought pulling two frag grenades from his suit and arming them. He lunged into the corridor, using his speed to avoid return fire, tossing both grenades under-handed down the corridor towards where the Elites were gathered. The Elites didn't hesitate as they fired at the fast moving target, plasma shots sizzled past Michael with several shots making contact with his armor. The reflective coating minimized their impacts and didn't slow him down. His speed and reflexes managed to minimize his exposure.

\_If this doesn't work, at least I'll save them the hassle of a court-martialâ€‘\_

The corridor continued to be filled with plasma shots, at least until both frag grenades exploded taking out the lead ranks of the Elites. With their fire slackening, it was just enough for Michael to move and close the gap quickly. He opened up with his MA5, cutting down several more Elites. Unfortunately there were still a lot more of them and Michael saw the ammo counter on his MA5 dropping to zero. There was no time for him to reload as a particularly aggressive Elite lunged at him with a plasma sword. Michael had only time to react as he dodged out of the way, leaving the plasma sword only slashing empty air where he had been. Michael saw Covenant weapons, from those he had already killed, littering the deck. He spun and

dove, grabbing a Covenant plasma rifle as he came back up. Using his augmented speed and reflexes, he turned and held the plasma rifle's trigger down, emptying plasma shot after plasma shot into the attacking Elite's head until the plasma rifle overheated and shutdown to vent and cool down. By that time there wasn't much left that was recognizable of the Elite's face and head.

The surviving Elites were recovering, Michael saw he didn't have much time. He moved quickly, grabbing a plasma grenade off the body of the Elite he had just killed, arming and tossing it at the surviving Elites. He managed to "stick" an Elite with the plasma grenade. Another huge explosion went off, killing or wounding the remaining enemy soldiers. Michael finally had the time to change clips in his MA5. He used short bursts from his weapon to finish off the wounded Elites before continuing down the corridor towards the hanger bay.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

"Fleet Master! The human ships are starting to fall back!" the Sangheili warrior manning the sensor station reported.

"Status of our strike teams and our attacks on the human's orbital defense constructs?" Fleet Master Duran 'Korahee demanded.

The Sangheili at communications reported, "Sir, all strike teams are reporting heavy fighting on all human orbital constructsâ€| Strike teams have disabled the main weapons on five of the smaller constructs and one of the larger constructs. Two of the larger and four of the smaller constructs are still firing on our task force."

"Order the task force to redirect their fire at the orbital constructs that are still firing at usâ€| Ignore the retreating human ships." 'Korahee ordered.

"Sir?" the Sangheili warrior at the communications responded with some puzzlement.

Ship Master Phur 'Doravee was standing nearby checking on the status of his ship, he heard the Fleet Master's commands and he was also confused with these new commands. After sacrificing so many ships and warriors that they were going to let the human fleet escape â€| it was inconceivable. The Ship Master spoke up, "Sir, why are we letting the human ships escape? We have this opportunity to destroy their fleet right here, now!"

'Korahee turned to face the Ship Master. 'Doravee could see the look in 'Korahee's eyes, that he was very close to crossing the line that could end with him being shoved out the air lock of his own ship.

"Ship Masterâ€|" 'Korahee growled in a low menacing tone, "â€|as I have said before I don't need to constantly explain myself and my orders, but since you cannot grasp the tactical situation I will explain it to you. We have heavily damaged the human fleet and forced them to retreat. Our strike teams have caused chaos and neutralized a large number of the human orbital defense constructs. We now have our window to begin landings on to this planet. We need to remove the remaining defenses to secure this orbital positionâ€| Do you

understand?"

"But Fleet Masterâ€| We have caused heavy losses and damage to the human fleet. We are giving them a chance toâ€|" 'Doravee started to reply

"ENOUGH!" 'Korahee shouted cutting off the Ship Master's response. He continued, "We have also suffered heavy losses today. We need to neutralize the remaining defense constructs and recover our strike teams. We can then begin landings and build up our ground bases. There are several large human cities in our projected landing area. Those cities will have to be dealt with and cleansed. Now continue following my orders or I will find worthy warriors that will follow my orders without questioning themâ€|"

"You leadâ€| I will follow." Ship Master 'Doravee said as he bowed his head to showing his subservience and that he would follow the orders given.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael finally made it to the observation deck above the hanger bay. He stayed in the shadows while observing the Covenant forces gathered in the hanger. He was trying to figure out how he was going to take on those forces when his com channel squawked, "Sierra-113â€| Sierra-113â€| Provide SITREPâ€|"

Michael was a little surprised as he recognized Lieutenant Grant's voice asking for a status update, but he hid it as he responded, "Sierra-113 hereâ€| I encountered enemy forces and have cleared area towards the hanger bay. I am currently on hanger bay observation deck. I am observing at least six-five plus enemy soldiers in the hanger bay with at least three phantom dropships in the hanger bayâ€| over."

"Roger Sierra-113, we copy your status. We need you to clear the hanger bay ASAP. The fleet is retreating and FLEETCOM is ordering the ODP's to cover the retreat and then scuttle to prevent capture. Commander Hanson is ordering all non-essential to abandon ship while he stays and continues to engage the Covenant fleet. We need the hanger bay cleared as there aren't enough escape pods for the crew to evacuate. Do you read?"

Michael let a sigh and shook his head slowly as he knew what was being asked of him. Without thinking â€" it was an automatic reflex now â€" he checked the clip in his MA5 and did a count of how many spare clips and frag grenades he was carrying.

"How much time do I have?" Michael asked in a matter of fact tone not betraying any of his thoughts or his feelings over the com channel.

"Commander Hanson wants to have personnel off in the next fifteen minutesâ€|"

"I'll call you back in ten minutesâ€| Sierra-113 out." Michael said as he closed the com channel and started moving down to the hanger bay.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Plasma shots soared over Michael's head as he ducked behind the cargo container. He could feel the container shudder as plasma shots bounced off of it. Michael had announced his presence when entering the hanger bay by throwing in a couple of frag grenades at the largest concentrations of Covenant troops. As the grenades went off, he quickly followed up by rushing in, blazing away with his MA5 taking out the closest and most immediate threats.

He scanned the hanger bay and there were at least twenty Covenant soldiers left â€“ a mix bag of Elites, Grunts and Jackals. It was easily apparent that they were not a happy bunch. He was figuring out how he was going to break cover and engage the remaining Covenant troops when the ODP heaved and shuddered heavily. Before the shuddering had even stopped his com channel came alive with Lieutenant Grant's voice.

"Sierra-113â€| We're taking fire from Covenant ships. There're only three ODPs left. Commander Hanson is ordering everyone off except him and a skeleton crew to maintain fire and cover the evacuation. We need those Pelicans to get the people off. What's the situation in the hanger bay? Overâ€| "

Michael took a quick peek from around the cargo container â€“ just managing to avoid several plasma and needler shots. He saw the five Pelicans, unfortunately three of them were shot up pretty badly and weren't going anywhere, but on the fortunate side there were three Covenant Phantom dropships just sitting there. He just needed to remove the remaining Covenant troops and that would be their way out.

"Tell Commander Hanson to send his people to the hanger bay. We have our rides out of here." Michael replied as he took a long breath and made sure he had a full clip in his MA5. He made his move, making sure that the remaining Pelicans and Phantoms didn't get damaged in the crossfire.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Lieutenant Grant led a fire team from his marine unit as they moved through the ODP down to the hanger bay. Grant and the fire team were point as they led those ODP crewmen that hadn't already evacuated via escape pods. As the mix group of navy personnel and marines moved towards the hanger bay they passed scenes of carnage from the fighting that had taken place. Grant found himself going wide-eye in amazement, as he realized that he was traveling the same path that the Spartan had come and this trail of death and destruction was left in his wake.

Grant and his group finally reached the hanger bay entrance, stopping as the Lieutenant signaled everyone to hold up. It was quietâ€| too quiet and Grant had a bad feeling. He called out on the com channel, "Sierra-113â€| Sierra-113â€| What's your status?"

Grant was at a loss as what to do next as only static replied on the com channel. The ODP shuddered violently from another hit, bringing back the immediate and more pressing need that they needed to get off the ODP and the hanger bay was their only way off. Grant took a deep breath, nodding to one of his marines. The marine hit the door panel and the hanger bay blast doors opened up.

As they entered, the marines and navy crew were greeted by the sight of complete carnage. The hanger bay was littered with the bodies of Covenant soldiers and sitting on a crate in the middle of this sight was a Spartan bent over holding his left side. Grant could see from the Spartan's posture that he was exhausted and probably injured. The Spartan's armor was scorched all over from plasma shots. Grant saw the Spartan looking towards him as he approached. As Michael stood up, Grant noticed why the Spartan was holding his left side — seeing the partially embedded portion of a crystalline shard from a needler sticking out of the Spartan's side.

"Jesusâ€œ! Are you okay?" Grant asked as his eyes were glued on the needler round sticking out of the Spartan's body.

Grant could hear the pain in the Spartan's voice as he replied, "Yeah, I'll surviveâ€œ! I got lucky and this shard didn't detonate."

"I tried to reach you on com channels."

"Sorry about that, my transmitter got fried from a plasma shotâ€œ! Is this everybody?" Michael replied trying to focus and control the pain he was in.

It took a moment for Grant to refocus and take his eyes off the needler round. The ODP heaved again from another hit bringing the Lieutenant back into focus. "Yeah, everyone is here. Time to get the hell out of Dodge!"

Grant looked around the hanger bay and saw that three of the Pelicans were non-flyable, "Shit!" he said expressing his frustration as he stared at the smoking Pelicans.

Grant was interrupted by Michael, "Take it easy Lieutenant. The Covenant were more than gracious to 'loan' us three of their Phantom dropships. That should give us more than enough space to get everyone here down to the planet."

Lieutenant Grant could only look on speechless as the Spartan pointed towards the undamaged Covenant dropships.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

"Status Update?" Commander Hanson ordered as the ODP shuddered from another hit from the Covenant.

Ensign Hamilton had volunteered to remain behind to continue manning the ODP to keep the "Iron Bitch" in the fight. He responded to his commander's query, "Sir, all the other ODPs in the battle zone have either been scuttled or destroyed by the Covenant fleet. Covenant ships are continuing to advance on our position. We've taken heavy damage on Decks 4, 5 and 7â€œ! they're exposed to space. Most of our autocannons and Archer missile launchers are destroyed or off-line. Power grid has taken heavy damage too. I've rerouted power, so that targeting systems and MAC are still on-lineâ€œ!"

"Thank you, Ensign. Excellent workâ€œ! Continue firing as long as you can." Hanson replied with genuine gratitude in his voice.

The ODP shuddered again as another Covenant plasma shot hit them, "What's the status of the evacuation?" Hanson asked.

Another crewman responded, "Escape pods have launched and are headed towards the planet surfaceâ€| Lieutenant Grant reports that the hanger bay has been secured by the Spartan. All dropships have launched and headed towards the planet surface. Lieutenant Grant added they had to 'borrow' several Covenant dropshipsâ€| "

Commander Hanson's face ticked upward in a smirk at the thought of the Covenant now having their dropships being used to save human lives.

The "Iron Bitch" shuddered from another hit.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

"Fleet Master, surviving strike teams are returning to the task force. There is only one human orbital defense construct left that is still firing on us." the Sangheili manning the tactical station reported.

"Excellentâ€| Order our ships to concentrate their fire on the last construct. Once it is destroyed all ships are to prepare for landing operations. We need to establish our ground bases. We will have reinforcements arriving soon to support our ground operations." responded Fleet Master 'Korahee.'

The Sangheili warriors manning the stations on the flagship's bridge acknowledged their Fleet Master's orders. The Covenant task force continued advancing and firing on the lone remaining human orbital defense platform.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

"Commander! We've lost power to the MAC! We have major structural damage and have fires on most decksâ€| except for the ones exposed to space." Ensign Hamilton reported as sparks flew from an exploding console as the ODP heaved up and down from another hit.

Well that's it, Commander Hanson thought as he heard the report and realizing that his ODP was in its final death throes.

"Okayâ€| Everyone, we've done our duty and it's time to abandon ship! Head to the escape pod and let's get the hell out of here!" Hanson ordered his remaining crew.

The remaining crew quickly made their way out of the CIC into the corridor as the ODP shuddered repeatedly from hits and secondary explosions occurring throughout the structure. Sparks shot from console panels causing the crew to duck and halt. Fear and uncertainty ran through everyone's minds as they didn't know if they would get to the last remaining escape pod before the ODP died. The decks heaved and the gravitational controls were starting to fail, but everyone struggled finally making it to the escape pod and boarding.

One of the crewmen quickly jumped into the escape pod's pilot seat, pressing the controls to seal the pod and prepare for launch. The other crew moved to secure themselves into the escape pod

seats.

"HIT IT!" Hanson ordered as he felt the ODP shudder again. He knew that it was going to be close.

The escape pod launched, seconds later a huge explosion tore through the section where they'd just been. As the escape pod hurtled towards the planet surface and apparent safety, Commander Hanson, Ensign Hamilton and the other surviving crew could only watch helplessly as Orbital Defense Platform numbered Whiskey-Tango-004 â€“ more affectionately known as the "Iron Bitch" â€“ continued to take plasma hit after plasma hit from the converging Covenant ships. The Iron Bitch finally blew up in a huge explosion lighting up the space around New Constantinople.

15. Lions and tigers and bears! Oh my!

\*\*CHAPTER FIFTEEN:\*\*

\*\*Lions and tigers and bears! Oh my!\*\*

\*\*UNSC Firebase Mitchell  
>New Constantinople<br>September 15, 2536 â€“ 1045 Local Time\*\*

Michael watched as the firebase was being evacuated. It had been over five weeks since the Covenant had defeated the orbital defenses around New Constantinople and had landed to establish ground bases to continue their attack on the planet.

He'd been wounded by a needler shard during the fighting against the Covenant on the ODP. He and the rest of the ODP crew had successfully evacuated the ODP after he had eliminated the Covenant and retaken the hanger bay. He had used a Covenant Phantom dropship that he had "borrowed" to make his escape along with the others back down to the planet's surface.

It had required an Ordnance Disposal team to help remove the unexploded needler shard from him and taken a week for his wounds to heal him along with getting his battle armor repaired from all the damage he had taken from the fighting. Lieutenant Grant's threats of court martial against Michael for leaving his position against orders, quietly went away as the Lieutenant didn't bring up or discuss the matter with higher command.

While Michael was recuperating and out of action, the Covenant had landed and established heavily shielded ground bases on the planet. There were several major cities and towns in the landing area and the fighting had been intense, desperate and horrific in and around those locales. Even though Vice-Admiral Whitcomb had given orders to evacuate the cities it still took time to all those people out of there. Despite a desperate and heroic rearguard defense by the marines, not everyone could get out of the area in time. Civilian causalities were horrendous. The invasion landing area was lit up by the burning cities and towns, like giant funeral pyres with smoke filling the sky as Covenant forces "cleansed" the area of humans.

Since then the Covenant had been expanding their beachhead on the

planet, spreading out in all directions. The fighting was sharp, intense and always desperate. The marines would almost fight the Covenant to a standstill on the ground, but then the enemy would bring in one of their ships and use either their plasma batteries or energy projectors to start "glassing" the surface destroying everything â€“ buildings, defenses, defenders and civilians.

Vice-Admiral Whitcomb hadn't been idle during this time as he'd been pushing his people to the limit as he reorganized and repaired the surviving units of his fleet with whatever resources he had on hand. He used his diminishing number of combat-capable ships like a rapier striking out using guerrilla-style hit and run raids at the Covenant fleet and surface units catching them when they were weak or unprepared.

The Vice-Admiral reorganized his surviving ODPs to provide cover for the fleet and cities on the far side of the planet. He had beefed up the close-in defenses of the platforms to take into account the new Covenant boarding tactics. The Covenant would counter this by sending in ships to test and try to penetrate those defenses. They would cause some damage, but the UNSC would beat them back. Both sides suffered losses, but the UNSC usually came out on the bad end of the exchange just beating back these probing attacks.

On the ground, Whitcomb was also trying to husband and conserve his limited resources. He utilized the Spartan-IIIs of Alpha Company as his surgical strike force to take out priority targets. He tried to preserve Alpha Company's strength and not use them on any suicide missions as other Spartan III units had been used as he knew they would be needed over the long run. Whitcomb had the marines conducting fighting withdrawals over the whole planet to buy time for civilians to be evacuated to safe zones. The marines sold their lives trying to buy this time, but it was slow going due to the size of the population involved and the areas covered. Everyone had already lost count of the number of massacres that had occurred as the Covenant expanded their hold on the planet.

Even with his tactics and his careful use of his remaining forces, Whitcomb realized that when the inevitable Covenant reinforcements arrived they would most likely overwhelm the remaining orbital and ground defenses. He knew that he was just buying time to try and evacuate and save as many lives as he could. He also realized that he couldn't just lose all his fleet units and ground units here as they would still be needed to continue the fight against the Covenant. There would come a point that he would either have to withdraw his remaining navy and marine units or lose everything. It burned in his gut that he would be abandoning civilians, but what choice did he have? That didn't mean that he wouldn't fight tooth and nail and hang on to the last possible moment getting as many civilians off the planet as he could. Whitcomb requisitioned, ordered and seized any vessel that could carry people off planet. Those ships that weren't capable of Slipspace travel were used to shuttle evacuees to meet with larger ships at rendezvous points in system.

Once Michael had been certified fit for return to duty, he had been immediately employed as a one-man fire brigade. He was dropped into the hottest battle zones to help stabilize the situation and support the ground units there. He was always in the thick of battle and he made the Covenant pay for every inch of ground, but he was only one

Spartan and he couldn't be at every point on the perimeter. When he stopped the Covenant at one point they would advance at other points. Michael didn't have all the information as that was for people at a higher pay grade than he was, but he could put two and two together and he could see that New Constantinople was doomed. That didn't mean he would give up â€" Spartans didn't know the meaning of give up. Stubborn was something else and Michael was nothing but stubborn and obstinate. He would do his duty and continue fighting to buy time so that more civilians could be evacuated.

As the firebase hastily prepared to evacuate, Michael was waiting for a Pelican to arrive to pick him up for his latest mission. FLEETCOM was ordering him to infiltrate behind Covenant lines and gather as much intel on the numbers and locations of all Covenant supply depots as well as any other information he could find. He was expected to do a lot on this mission and he was going to have enough supplies dropped with him for up to two weeks. Michael stood and watched as soldiers and support personnel moved at a frantic pace to pack up as much of base as they could. The latest intel reports had Covenant forces moving towards the firebase and everyone wanted to be out of here before they arrived.

The whine and roar of an incoming Pelican's engines interrupted Michael's thoughts. He saw the designation number on the Pelican and recognized it as the one that was his pickup ride.

\_Time to go to work\_, he thought gathering his equipment as he went to meet the Pelican as it came in for a landing amid the chaos of the evacuating firebase.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

\*\*10 days later â€" 2218 Local Time\*\*

There was no sound except for the wind as Michael moved quietly through the remains of what had been a town until the Covenant had swept through the area. He stayed in the shadows moving through the bombed and burned out buildings. He pushed the images of the bodies and remains of those town inhabitants that hadn't been able to leave, before the Covenant arrived, to the back of his mind.

For the last ten days, he'd had been performing recon in his assigned mission area, observing and checking out Covenant positions and then sending the information via encrypted burst transmission to FLEETCOM. Intelligence intercepts of Covenant communications indicated that the area was being used as a major supply depot for Covenant operations on the planet. During his recon patrols, he had found and investigated a number of small supply depots, but he had determined that these depots by themselves were too small to sustain current Covenant operations. These smaller supply dumps seemed to indicate that there was a much larger depot out there that was feeding these small ones.

Michael continued making his way through the destroyed town, his plan was that once he cleared the town, he would do a sweep to the north and then come back skirting the edge of town to head back where he had setup his base of operations.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Special Operations Officer Jaqo 'Putumee observed the ruins of the human settlement ahead of him. From what he could observe there appeared to be nothing living in the town.

"It appears that we cleansed this area effectivelyâ€|" he murmured to himself as he viewed the death and devastation.

"Sir? Did you say something?" asked Oro 'Gradaree who was 'Putumee's second in command.

'Putumee turned to 'Gradaree, "Noâ€| It was nothing. Gather the rest of the unit." he said.

'Putumee watched as his second in command gathered the rest of his special operations unit together around him. He looked at the eleven Sangheili special operations soldiers that he commanded. He met each of their eyes and they nodded back to their commander.

"Warriorsâ€| We are here to hunt a most dangerous prey. There have been sightings of a human demonâ€| A so-called Spartan operating in this area." he said.

The gathered soldiers started murmuring as they became restless and agitated at hearing that they were hunting a demon.

'Putumee saw their agitation and quickly spoke to put them at ease, "Yesâ€| I know the stories that have been told of theseâ€|Spartans, but we have our orders and we are to remove this threat to our supply depots and operations."

He paused to let his words sink in. He saw his soldiers begin to settle down, focusing on their task and duty, "â€|we have received reports from Kig-Yar sentries that they thought that they detected movement in this general area over the last several days."

'Putumee saw several of his soldiers shake their heads, "Yes, I know what you are thinkingâ€| We are being sent out on a hunt for imagined Kig-Yar ghosts." he said somewhat sarcastically eliciting a few laughs.

He let the laughs subside before continuing, "It is important that we protect our supply depots, so we will perform our duty as requiredâ€| 'Gradaree, I want you to take seven soldiers and approach this town from the West. I want you to make noise and be as visible as possible, but don't be too obvious about itâ€| I will take the rest of the unit and approach from the South-East. The plan is for you to make contact with the demon and force him right into my groupâ€| Do you understand?"

'Putumee saw his special operations soldiers nod their understanding. He grunted with satisfaction as he knew that he could rely on his soldiers as they were all veterans of previous operations and campaigns.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Using his sensors and augmented eyesight, Michael scanned the area in front of his current position where he'd hold up. The ruins and desolation had started to look all the same as he yawned. Without thinking he held his hand up to his face even though he couldn't

touch his face inside his helmet.

He blinked his eyes while giving his head a shake to wake himself up more. He suddenly became alert, snapping to attention as his audio sensors picked up what sounded like slow movement through the rubble at a distance. He turned towards where he had heard the sounds. At first he didn't see anything, but the sounds were starting to get closer. The last remnants of daylight was fading which reduced his visual distance, he switched his helmet over to night amplification mode.

\_Thereâ€¢\_|\_

Michael could pick out Elites moving through the rubble. He studied their movements and their uniforms. He identified them as Special Operations soldiers. They were strung out in a line, 250 meters out and the direction they were moving in would eventually have them sweep through his position.

\_Hmmmâ€¢| time to leave\_, he thought as he started moving slowly backwards to retreat. He hadn't planned on or wanted an open confrontation with the Covenant right now.

As he moved, something about how the Elites were moving was bothering him. It was nagging at him that something wasn't right about the whole situation.

\_Those are Special Ops Elitesâ€¢|they stay quiet. They might as well be a bunch of Grunts for all the noise they're makingâ€¢|\_

Michael wasn't going to complain if the Elites wanted to stumble around and ghost their position, allowing him a quiet exit. But, something still didn't sit right and he'd learned to listen to his feelings and instincts. They had kept him alive so far.

"Time to get out of the lion's denâ€¢|" Michael muttered as the words of an old story passed through his mind, \_Lions and tigers and bears, oh myâ€¢|\_

\_Damn! Tigers!\_

It suddenly came to him and he realized what was happening. He stopped and quickly scanned the area around him using his optics and motion sensors. It took a moment, but then he detected movement from another direction. This was a smaller group of Elites and they were moving slower and much quieter than the larger group.

\_Smart bastards!\_ Michael thought as he realized that the first group was trying to herd him into a position to be taken out by this other group. His first option was that he could just fall back and avoid contact, but the realization that the Covenant knew that he was out here and had sent this Special Ops unit in to hunt him down changed the whole situation.

The course of action that he had to decide on, was to whether to engage the Elites now or wait and engage later. The problem with engaging later was that he may not have any advantage and could get caught in a bad position. That decided the when, but which group would he engage first?

He checked out both groups and tried to put himself in the boots of the Elite commander and how he would approach this situation. He considered that if he was hunting himself, he would put the best fighters in the smaller unit as that would be the kill team and the other larger group would be the distraction. It was a hard choice who to engage first, but it was better to take out the larger group first and for him to use his speed to keep moving and not get pinned down in place. If things went bad, he could try and break away to lose them.

He also realized that as soon as the fight started, the smaller group would move fast to catch him in a crossfire. He knew that he needed to make the biggest bang as possible with his first shot. At the thought of explosions, a little smile appeared on his face as an idea came to him.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

'Gradaree swept the ruins ahead of him and his soldiers for any sign of life or movement. He turned his head from side to side, checking on his soldiers as they moved slowly through the ruins. He felt uneasy as they were making more noise than what he was used to on a hunt operation. So far there had been no sign of the human demon and 'Gradaree was finding himself a little torn about this though he would never admit it out loud. The warrior part of his soul burned looking forward to battling this human, but the stories he'd heard about these Spartans, they chilled the other part of his soul. There was no doubt about his bravery, he was a veteran of many battles proving himself time and time again, but this was different.

Doing another quick glance on his soldiers, 'Gradaree wasn't worried about them not following their orders or doing their duty as they were all Special Operations soldiers. He was worried about what was waiting out there for them in the darkness and ruins of this dead human town.

He'd become momentarily distracted by his thoughts and worries that he missed a large object that came flying in and landed on his right flank just behind his soldiers on that side.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael looked on satisfactorily as his helmet's night amplification mode switched off as a huge explosion went off lighting up the darkness. He had moved into a flanking position of the larger Elite group and waited for them to pass by him. He moved up quietly behind them, just like he had been trained to do. Using some wire he found, he bundled three of his frag grenades together then activated one of them. He quickly tossed the bundle of grenades to just land behind the Elites.

The grenades took out three of the Elites. Before they could react, Michael opened up with his battle rifle taking out two more before the rest of the group could find cover. He ducked behind the rubble as plasma rifle shots streaked through the darkness from the survivors.

"Time to moveâ€œ!" Michael muttered, checking his motion sensors before moving backwards, to sweep again around the Elites.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

'Putumee saw the explosion and heard the shooting. The realization struck him that his plan to hunt down the Spartan had failed. Cursing under his breath, he quickly signaled his men to follow him. As they moved to join up with the rest of his team, he tried to figure what the human would do next. These Spartans were somewhat like Sangheili warriors, they faced the challenge of battle. Their tactics were unorthodox and not what he would choose to do, but they were still effective. The Covenant dismissed the humans as feeble and ineffective, but even with their technology lagging behind, they still managed to kill large numbers of Covenant soldiers.

He figured that the Spartan would fall back and move to another firing position rather than continuing to attack as a Sangheili would do. 'Putumee hated to leave his subordinate on his own, but the duty and honor of completing this mission overrode anything else. Signaling his soldiers, they followed him as they moved to make a wider sweep back around to the left of 'Gradaree's position.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

More tracer rounds came out of the darkness, 'Gradaree heard another one of his soldiers scream out as he got hit. That left him and one other soldier still standing. 'Gradaree saw his remaining soldier firing back at the position where the human fire had come from. He thought he caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure moving through the darkness " changing positions. A burning desire to strike back overtook 'Gradaree as he drew his plasma sword. The urge to strike back was strong, but he managed to maintain control as he didn't activate the sword. He moved quickly and silently to flank where he saw the human demon move to.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Exchanging fire with an Elite, Michael could feel himself getting bogged down in this firefight.

\_Have to keep movingâ€| Still lots of Elites out thereâ€|\_

His mind was racing continually evaluating and re-evaluating his tactical situation. The Elite fired another burst causing Michael to duck. He responded by popping back up and firing a quick burst. He got a break as he'd been faster than the Elite and caught the alien with his three-shot burst directly in the face. As the Elite dropped dead to the ground, Michael didn't have time to take any satisfaction in his kill. The distinctive sound of an energy sword being activated caught him by surprise. Using his augmented reflexes, he instinctively spun towards the threat while ducking at the same time. His visor filled with a bright shimmering light as the plasma sword missed him by inches. Swinging his battle rifle to counter the Elite's back swing, the rifle and sword struck each other causing both combatants to lose their weapons as they flew out of their hands into the darkness. Michael's close-combat training kicked in and he didn't hesitate. He moved quickly grappling with the Elite, each of them trading blows. He didn't have the best position and he couldn't let go to reach for his combat knife as the Elite was reaching for his throat. Michael leveraged to get a better position to get his

hands around the alien's neck.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

'Putumee and his soldiers had completed their wide sweep around the left flank. They came up on the battlefield and he saw 'Gradaree struggling in hand to hand combat with the human. Before he could even raise his weapon to fire, to help his subordinate, one of his soldiers pre-empted him by tossing a plasma grenade in an attempt to "stick" the Spartan.

"NO!" 'Putumee screamed watching the glowing plasma grenade fly through the air towards the human and 'Gradaree.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael was focused in his death struggle with the Elite, but his mind suddenly screamed out a warning. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the reflection of a glowing object flying through the air.

\_SHIT!\_

In that split-second Michael realized what the glowing object was and that it was heading for him. In that instant, he reacted by loosening his grip on the Elite, who was apparently unaware of the incoming plasma grenade. The alien made his move to take advantage of the human's mistake. In one single movement, Michael shifted his weight and body position, with both hands moving in one blindingly fast movement, gripping tightly on to the Elite's body while pivoting at the same time. The Elite was caught by surprise and off balance as Michael spun both of them, placing the alien's body between him and the incoming plasma grenade.

For Michael everything was moving in slow motion. He saw the plasma grenade land, sticking to the Elite's back. He had a clear view and could see the look of shock and surprise register on the alien's face as he realized what had happened and that he was about to die. Michael tightened his grip on the Elite's body to make sure that his back, with the sizzling grenade, was pointed away from him.

The grenade went offâ€!

There was a moment of clarity for Michael as the plasma grenade exploded. Time felt as if it had stopped as his world lit up with a huge blinding bright flash of light. The Elite's body absorbed most of the blast, but the explosion threw Michael almost ten feet. He felt nothing as he hit the ground hard.

\_He was standing on a balcony looking out at a huge blue lake with a forest surrounding it. The day was clear, with the sun high in the sky. He wasn't wearing his armor, but a gentle breeze coming off the lake kept the temperature quite nice even with the warmth of the sun heating his skin. He suddenly felt the presence of someone else and quickly turned to face it. He was greeted with the sight of a woman with brunette hair â€“ she was young and beautiful. He thought he recognized and knew her. He didn't know her name, but he felt as if it was at the tip of his tongue, waiting for him to say it. Her face lit up as she smiled at him and her eyes met his. He was struck by a strange feeling he'd never had before. Before he could even think,

words came out of his mouth, "\_Can I stay here with you?\_" he asked as he kept looking into her eyes. A mix of feelings caught him by surprise as the young woman stepped closer towards him. She was still smiling as she placed her hand gently on his face. He could feel the warmth of her hand on his cheek. Confusion and other feelings mixed and welled up inside him. "\_Michaelâ€œ You need to wake upâ€œ You need to move now.\_" the woman said still smiling. He looked at her, feeling even more confused. She spoke again, this time in a more urgent tone, "\_Wake up soldier and get moving!\_"

Michael forced his eyes to open as he tried to remember where he was and what had happened. Confusing images flashed through his mind as he tried to shake off the effects of the explosion. It felt like he had been out for hours, but according to the readout out on his helmet display it had been less than a minute.

Every muscle and joint burned and ached as he forced himself to get up and move. He pushed aside the pain, as he'd been trained to do as he had to force himself to keep moving as his audio sensors picked up the sounds of approaching footsteps. He couldn't fully stand yet and he didn't also want to make himself a target, so he crawled and scrambled his way along the ground. He used his hands to guide him and help keep his balance as he skittered low across the ground. His hand brushed across a familiar curved piece of metal, there was no hesitation on his part as he gripped tightly onto it.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

'Putumee had seen the plasma grenade stick to his subordinate's back as the Spartan had spun 'Gradaree at the last second to use the body as a shield. The explosion had temporarily blinded everyone. As soon as they'd recovered, the Sangheili warriors moved up carefully to check the area of where the grenade had gone off to see if the human demon was still alive.

'Putumee muttered curses as his warriors scoured the area for any remains of the human. He'd lost most of his unit on this hunt, but if the Spartan was dead then the cost would have been worth it. He quickly got word, that his soldiers had found no sign of the demon.

"Spread out and keep your eyes open!" 'Putumee hissed at his remaining troops. The Sangheili soldiers formed a small arc, moving forward as group out from the blast site looking for any signs or evidence of the human.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Taking a minute to catch his breath, Michael did another check for any serious injuries. His head was throbbing and his vision was blurry, but there appeared to be no serious injuries as far as he could tell. Between using the Elite as a blast shield, his battle armor and his augmentations, he had managed to survive a close encounter with a plasma grenade.

\_Good to know, but I wouldn't recommend trying that again\_, he thought trying to focus his vision. He started moving as he detected approaching Elites.

He had four hard targets on his motion sensors and as he kept moving, his mind was slowly clearing away the fog even with the continual throbbing pain. He kept low and stayed quiet as he moved to his right to get on the flank of the Elites. All he had left for weapons was one frag grenade, combat knife and the plasma energy sword he had stumbled across. There was no thought of retreat, he needed to finish this off now and then he could go back to his hideout to rest and recover. He pulled out and armed his last frag grenade.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

'Putumee's senses were on high alert as he continued moving slowly through the rubble. His head whipped to the right as an explosion went off catching two of his soldiers. Before he could react to the threat, he heard another Sangheili cry out. This time whipping his head back to the left, his eyes went wide in surprise and shock as he was confronted with the sight of the human removing the blade of a plasma sword from the chest of his last soldier.

"Demon!" 'Putumee hissed turning to face the human, drawing and activating his own plasma sword. He could see and feel the human look at him, but couldn't see its face hidden behind the golden colored visor of its helmet. He had no fear as he stared at the glow of the plasma sword reflected off the Spartan's visor.

This is the way it should be| This is the way it should end|  
There is a certain rightness to this, as a calmness came over  
'Putumee, circling and watching the Spartan as he anticipated the upcoming duel.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael fought his blurry vision and the taste of blood in his mouth as he faced this last Elite. He saw the markings on the Elite's armor and recognized his last opponent as the unit leader of the Special Ops unit. He knew that he was hurting, but there was no other option now as he and the alien circled each other, each holding plasma swords in front of them.

Not now| this is not my time, he thought as he fought to focus on the Elite. He focused on the chest of his opponent, so that his shoulders or arms wouldn't distract him with a fake move to get him to expose himself. He didn't have to wait long as the Elite lunged in at him.

Michael may not have been trained in the use of plasma swords, but he used his training, instincts and augmented reflexes to try and balance out any lack of experience. He quickly moved to the side, deflecting the Elite's sword slash with his sword. Flashing plasma crackled and pulsed as both energy swords struck each other. Each opponent adjusted their positions, again sizing each other up.

Michael kept circling, watching the Elite looking for an opening to strike. His lack of experience sword fighting almost cost him as he almost missed it. His augmented reflexes was the only thing that saved him as he arched backwards and side-step as the Elite took another swing at him. His audio sensors filled with the sounds of crackling plasma as it cut into the air inches from his armor.

Quickly regaining his balance, Michael counter-attacked. The Elite anticipated the counterstrike and easily met and blocked the human's blow.

\_Enough of thisâ€| Time to change the rulesâ€|\_

Michael knew that the Elite had more experience fighting with plasma swords. The longer this went on the more of a disadvantage he would be at if they continued fighting to the Elite's style.

Faking to his left, Michael went right with his sword swing. He knew it was an obvious move and the Elite easily countered and blocked it. The alien wasn't expecting the follow-up move as Michael caught the Elite in the face with a punch, with his left hand, sending the creature staggering back.

The Elite roared in rage as he recovered from the blow. This caused Michael to smirk inside his helmet, satisfied that he was getting under the alien's skin, causing him to be off balance and distracted. The Elite rushed at him swinging his sword cutting into empty air as Michael moved backwards dodging the attempted death blows. Michael countered and blocked the sword. Spinning in a blindly fast move, he struck the Elite, again in the head, with his left elbow sending the alien staggering again.

The Elite staggered from the blow and turned to face the human, letting out another angry roar. Michael could see the rage in the creature's eyes. He knew that he had really pissed off the Elite now. The alien stopped trying to be fancy with his attacks, resorting to using brute force to overwhelm the human as he charged, swinging his sword wildly, which Michael easily avoided or blocked.

An uneasy pause came over the duel as the Elite paused to catch his breath. Facing off against the alien, Michael knew that he couldn't let his enemy recover his balance and he was still dealing with his own injuries as well. He made the motion to step forward to challenge the Elite. This provoked the creature, causing him to charge letting out a fierce roar.

Michael saw his opening, knowing that the move he was attempting was risky if the Elite hadn't been distracted and unfocused by his anger. As the Elite charged at him, Michael used his speed and reflexes to time side-stepping and spinning as the Elite went past him. In one quick motion, he was facing the back of the Elite, there was no hesitation as he used his speed to wrap his left arm across the alien's neck while shoving the plasma sword right into the middle of the Elite's back. The creature screamed and roared in pain as the plasma blade pierced out his front chest. The alien thrashed trying to break free, but Michael maintained his death grip, pushing the blade even deeper. He could feel the Elite dying as he maintained his grip. The alien finally slumped forward as the life left him. Michael let the body fall to the ground, sliding off the crackling plasma sword. The only sound that he could hear was the wind blowing through the ruins of the dead town. Michael could feel his heart pounding as he looked at the dead alien on the ground. The throbbing in his head switched to a pounding, he dropped to his knees as he felt his strength give out.

Michael knew he couldn't stay here and he had to get moving again. If there was a Special Ops team out hunting him then there was probably

more Covenant around looking for him. He took some deep breaths, focusing on getting himself to stand back up. Finally able to get enough strength to stand up, he staggered away to head back to his hidden outpost while trying to keep an eye on his motion sensors for anymore threats.

It took him longer, than it would have normally, to get back to his outpost that was hidden in the hills some distance away from where he had fought the Elites in the ruined town. He had barely staggered into his hideout, when his strength finally gave out. He collapsed to the floor, closing his eyes from the pain in his head and the rest of his body.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Finally opening his eyes, Michael checked his helmet display. It told him that he had been out for over a day. As he slowly moved, his head wasn't pounding as much and the pain in his body wasn't as bad. He got up on his hands and knees and made his over to the wall of his outpost. He popped his helmet and let it fall to the ground, he turned over and sat on the ground with his back against the wall of the outpost.

His mind was filled with different thoughts and was wandering, it took him a moment for him to refocus and regain some sort of equilibrium. He went over his encounter with the Elite Special Operations unit and he could feel a sense of frustration grow inside him.

This mission is blownâ€| I wasn't able to find the main supply depot, but taking out the smaller ones should slow up the Covenant's operations for a whileâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Ten hours later, he heard the whine of a Pelican's engines as it came in to hover low to the ground to pick him up. He had radioed FLEETCOM for pickup and to scrub the rest of his recon mission. Command was disappointed to say the least, but when he related details of his encounter with the Covenant Special Ops group they knew that it was time to withdraw the Spartan and not risk the loss of this precious resource.

The plan was to now send in some ODSTs to take out the identified supply depots. Maybe they would have better luck finding the main depot. All Michael knew was that he was headed back to a temporary base for a quick medical check and then redeployed to deal with the next Covenant threat.

## 16. Just another mission

\*\*CHAPTER SIXTEEN:\*\*

\*\*Just another mission\*\*

\*\*New Constantinople  
>December 3, 2536 â€" 0630 Local Time<strong>

Michael could still feel the exhaustion pull at him as he opened his

eyes. He had been asleep for a couple of hours, making it probably the most sleep that he'd had in the last few weeks. He was tiredâ€¢ bone-tired. He shifted his sitting position, feeling the ache from his back and ribs which were the result from dealing with a couple of Hunters two weeks ago that were attacking a Marine position that he had been supporting.

He had lost count of the number of bruises, cuts and pains he had. He wasn't going to complain as he pushed the pain to the back of his mind as he had been trained to do. What medical support and supplies were available were only being directed to the most critically injured that could be save, those that were terminal were just being made comfortable.

Michael looked at his armor, it was scorched and pitted from fragments and Covenant weapons fire. The armor wasn't pretty to look at as even the "113" was almost burned away, but the armor was still functional as the techs were working minor miracles despite the conditions and the supply situation.

The situation was desperateâ€¢

New Constantinople was close to falling. Most of the major cities were gone, they were either burning ruins from ground fighting or being "glassed" by Covenant spaceships. Vice-Admiral Whitcomb had pushed his forces to the breaking point and they had managed to hold on by their fingertips up until three weeks ago. The dam finally burst as Covenant reinforcements arrived in system. Whitcomb had fought another huge battle in close orbit against the arriving Covenant forces. That he had managed to extricate any fleet units was a minor miracle.

The surviving UNSC fleet units had retreated to the system's asteroid belt to hidden supply bases. Whitcomb had ships making regular runs to New Constantinople to bring in supplies, hit the Covenant and evacuate what civilians they could. The evacuation situation was desperate, where the UNSC was able to evacuate only hundreds or maybe thousands, the Covenant were slaughtering tens and hundreds of thousands.

Michael had enough information that he figured that the planet would be overrun in two maybe three weeks at the most. The defending forces had fallen back to one of New Constantinople's smaller continents and the remaining civilians and UNSC forces were gathering there, preparing for the Covenant's final push.

He knew of how desperate the situation had become. He had heard that Whitcomb had withdrawn Alpha Company off the planet. This bit of news was a closely guarded secret as the news that the Spartan company had been withdrawn would be a further blow to the already shaky morale of the defenders. That left Michael as the only Spartan on New Constantinople.

Most of his recent missions had been either to provide support for Marine units or long range operations to take out Covenant supply dumps and gather Intel on their forces and intentions. He had used his experience in field interrogations against the Innies to good effect against the Covenant and he had been able to gather quite a good amount of Intel, but it wasn't going to change the final outcome on this planet. It would only help delay it so that maybe they could

get a few more civilians out.

\_Time to go to work\_, Michael thought as he did a quick check of his armor systems and weapons before standing up. He did some stretching to try and loosen up his tight muscles, before heading down the tunnel towards the surface from the underground bunker that he was resting up in. As he made his way towards the surface many thoughts flowed through his mind. They were suddenly interrupted by a com signal coming through his helmet radio.

"Sierra-113â€| Report to the communication center on level threeâ€| You have incoming message trafficâ€| Priority-Oneâ€| Confirm Sierra-113â€| Over?"

He hadn't been expecting any com traffic as his orders didn't have him reporting in for several more hours. His surprise delayed his immediate response as his thoughts were redirected to this unexpected call.

"Sierra-113 hereâ€| Message receivedâ€| Will be at the communication center ASAPâ€| Over."

Michael made a quick turn and headed back down deeper into the bunker complex, trying to figure out what was happening now and what this message was all about.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

A Marine Major greeted Michael as he entered the communications center.

"Spartanâ€| Your incoming message is on hold at the terminal over there." the Major said pointing to a video console in the far corner of the communication center.

"â€|Just type in your access code when you are ready." the Major added.

Michael nodded his understanding, making his way towards the video console. He was caught by surprise when the Major spoke up in a loud voice to the whole room.

"Everyone clear the room! This is Code-Black message trafficâ€| Secure all your consoles."

He watched as all the communications personnel quickly cleared the room. As the people cleared past him, he could see them look at him and murmur as they speculated what could be going on. This increased his curiosity, but along with that curiosity came a bad feeling as he typed his access code into the video console. The video screen came alive with an older male wearing a senior officer's uniform.

"Sierra-113â€| Good to see you are still with usâ€|" came the voice through the video console.

Michael didn't recognize the officer and his bad feeling only grew as the officer used a familiar tone with him, "Thank you, sir. I am operating well considering the current circumstances." he replied using his standard monotone military voice.

"Well, we just want you to know how proud we are of you. The reports we have been getting back of your work on New Constantinople have been exemplary. The intelligence you've gathered on the Innies has been a tremendous boon to us!" the officer said with a smile that bothered Michael.

\_Jesusâ€| ONIâ€| At a time like this with the planet about to fall to the Covenant and they're praising me about my interrogations and network against the Innies?!

Michael was glad that he kept his helmet on, so that the officer couldn't see the look of disgust forming on his face.

"Yes, sirâ€| Thank you, sirâ€|" he replied again using the monotone voice, but trying hard to not let his disgust leak through.

The officer either didn't notice or was oblivious to Michael's tone as he continued on, "With that being said, we've gotten another lead. There appears to be a major Innies strategist located within an easy Pelican ride from you. We need you to go and grab him and bring him in. We are downloading all the mission details to your console."

Michael could feel his anger growing and took a long moment before responding, "Sirâ€| With all due respectsâ€| This is a wasted mission and a misuse of resources. This planet is going to fall and to send me out to hunt down Innies is not going to help. Maybe you don't realize the tactical sitâ€""

The officer cut him off using a harsh tone, "We're very much aware of the current tactical situation! We can't change that, what we can do is take advantage of this golden opportunity to get a hold of a senior insurrectionist strategist. The information in his head outweighs any other considerations at this momentâ€| Do you read me?"

His training and indoctrination overcame the feeling of disgust that was building in him as Michael came to attention, "Crystal clear, sir."

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

An hour later Michael found himself the lone passenger on one of the few remaining Pelicans flying towards the co-ordinates that ONI had provided him. He had almost wished that the base commander had put up more of a fight assigning him a precious dropship, but the ONI authorization quickly closed off that route.

This now left him with nothing but time to review the mission profile while still fuming over this assignment. He tried to focus on this mission, but after everything he had seen and done in the last few months, against the Covenant, had reaffirmed his conviction that being sent out on these Innies ops was nothing but a waste of resources and his skills. Michael closed his eyes for a moment, a flash of an image of blood covering his hands came rushing back. His eyes shot open as he tried to push the memory away.

Letting out a deep sigh, Michael decided to review his mission orders again, even though he had already memorized them. The mission was to

head to a small settlement area in the southwest quadrant of the continent to locate a man named John Larson. The intel that ONI provided was that Larson had a small farm in the area and Michael would be set down several klicks from the farm. Background info on Larson was that he was a former marine Captain that had retired over two decades ago. Larson's military record was long and impressive. He had distinguished himself in numerous battles and campaigns and had been involved with planning special ops missions. What the information failed to indicate was why a former decorated marine would turn against the UNSC.

Maybe I'll get a chance to ask that question, Michael thought focusing on the mission details while trying not to let the images of his last Innies missions stray into his thoughts. He looked at the farm location and compared it to the latest intel he had on the fighting and Covenant positions.

Hmmmm! The one consolation is that this target area is close to the front lines! If this Larson is smart he would have already left the area! If I'm lucky he's long gone and the only thing lost is the fuel wasted by the trip! Only if I'm that lucky!\_ Michael thought with a sigh as the Pelican continued towards its objective.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

"Grandpa? Did you hear what I said?" asked a female voice.

"Huh? Sorry my dear, I was just thinking! You know how my old mind likes to wander."

John Larson turned, looking at his granddaughter standing at the door of the kitchen of the simple plain farmhouse that they lived in. A lifetime of memories and regrets came flooding back. Larson had retired to this farm with his wife after a long career serving with the Marines. Their only son, David, had been living on Jericho VII with his family. John had been looking forward to a quiet retirement, but that was before their young grandson had died of a mysterious genetic disease. It was never the same with David after that as he had blamed the UNSC for his son's death. It got worse when David's wife got sick and died not much later.

The first that John found out that his son was involved with the separatists was when he had shown up at the farm with his four year old daughter, Andrea, in tow. He had pleaded with his son not to go down this road and focus on staying and taking care of Andrea, but John had seen the look in his son's eyes and he watched his son leave knowing how it was going to end. It was a number of years later that he received word that David had been killed "assassinated" by the UNSC.

That had been the final straw as he couldn't let go of the pain of losing his grandson, daughter-in-law and then his son. He started to help the separatists by providing them his military knowledge and experience on UNSC operations to help them with their tactical operational planning. He and his wife "Sonia" raised Andrea on the farm, trying to give her a normal upbringing.

Sonia had passed away five years ago leaving him to raise Andrea by himself. It was hard, but as he looked at his granddaughter and

seeing how she had turned out, brought a small smile to his face. The smile quickly faded as the current reality of the Covenant invasion intruded into his thoughts. Andrea had just turned twenty-one. The original plan had been for her to go to university in Antioch, but she had delayed to help out around the farm. Now it was too late for anything.

"You're thinking about what's going to happen to usâ€¦ aren't you?" Andrea asked worriedly as she read her grandfather's face.

Andrea didn't have any military experience, other than the stories she'd heard growing up. She could hear the rumble of the distant fighting with bright flashes lighting up the night sky. It didn't take a military genius to know what was going to happen even if the UNSC was being tight-lipped about the situation.

"I'm still working on trying to us get out. Worse case we head to the caves in the hills. I've been stocking supplies there for a long time." John replied reassuringly.

He left unsaid that most of the supplies that he had been "stockpiling" were actually for the insurgency. He had tried to keep Andrea out of it, but he knew it was getting harder to hide it as she got older. He wanted her to have a real life and not be pulled down by the hatred and the memories of those long dead.

"How long do you think we have?" she asked.

The question caught John by surprise. He hesitated as he had to think about his response. He didn't hold back the truth.

"We've got a few days maybe a week before the Covenant get here." he responded.

He watched as he saw a sad smile cross his granddaughter's face. He felt only feel a sense of sadness and further loss looking at her.

Her face is so beautifulâ€¦ It was made to laugh and smileâ€¦ It breaks my heart, he thought.

Any further sad and dark thoughts were interrupted as Andrea suddenly spoke up.

"Grandpaâ€¦ Do you hear that sound? It's getting closer."

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Khurn 'Mantakree watched the ground get closer as his Phantom dropship came in for a landing. He glanced at the other Sangheili warriors in his Special Operations unit and then looked back out to the human buildings in the distance that were in his mission target area.

'Mantakree felt that this mission had been rushed and he would have liked to have brought more troops, but time had been of the essence. Covenant intelligence had intercepted human communications and had managed to decode some of the message. The intercepted message indicated that one of those human \_demons\_ would be in this general

area near a farm. There had been no specific location details other than that, so senior Covenant commanders had decided to take a blanket approach, sending out units to cover all the farms in the area. It may have been considered an unnecessary or wasted approach, but the chance to kill one of those human \_demons\_ was one that the Prophets and 'Mantakree's superiors felt was worth this use of warriors and resources.

'Mantakree motioned for the rest of his unit to follow him as he disembarked the dropship. The Sangheili warriors moved quietly towards the human structures. The buildings appeared empty and devoid of life.

\_Just a dead end\_, 'Mantakree thought releasing a slight sigh of disappointment.

One of his lieutenants approached, speaking up causing 'Mantakree to turn his head suddenly, "Sirâ€| What should weâ€""

The Sangheili never finished his question as his head exploded from a human bullet which was followed by more weapons fire coming from one of the human buildings.

\_This just got interesting\_, 'Mantakree thought ducking for cover along with the other surviving members of his unit.

The Sangheili warriors didn't hesitate as they started returning fire.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

"Damn it!" John muttered under his breath, firing another shot at the Covenant Elites as they dove for cover. He had zeroed in on who he thought was the unit leader, but the alien's sudden movements had thrown off his shot. At least he had taken out one of the aliens. He saw, with some satisfaction, that Andrea had managed to take out another alien with her rifle.

It had been fortunate that Andrea had heard the approaching Covenant dropship. It had given them time to turn out all the lights and get their weapons out. Given John's relationship with the insurgency, he had accumulated a little more firepower than what was considered normal for a farmer.

John put down the SRS99 sniper rifle, exchanging it for the MA5 that he'd placed on the floor beside him. He also put on a bandolier that was carrying extra magazines for the assault rifle. He heard the crack of a weapon firing and looked over to where Andrea was kneeling and firing off several rounds from the BR55 Battle Rifle that she was using. This brought a slight smirk to his face as he had taught her how to use the Battle Rifle when she was ten. That she had become very proficient in how to use it was an understatement. He marveled at how calm and cool she was as she took her time to aim and fire another burst at the aliens.

\_She could give those ODSTs a run for their money\_, John thought proudly as he picked a target with his MA5, firing a short burst at the aliens.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

'Mantakree howled a curse as he saw another one of his warriors cut down by human fire from what appeared to be the main living structure of this farm.

\_Damn humans!\_ he thought as he signaled to the survivors of his unit to spread out and surround the building. His unit was returning fire with their plasma rifles, but the human building appeared to have been reinforced as it was absorbing a lot of fire rather than being easily destroyed.

"Keep firing!" Mantakree shouted to his unit as his plasma rifle vented to cool it down as it had overheated from his constant firing.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

John took a moment to catch his breath while loading another magazine into his MA5. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he could see the walls of his farm house shimmer from the heat caused by the alien's plasma weapons.

His involvement with the insurgency had caused him to take some precautions. Along with stockpiling certain "illegal" weapons, he had reinforced the walls of the house with armored plating and had armored window shutters installed. He done this with the expectation that any unwanted visitors would have been from the UNSC, but these renovations were doing the job against the Covenant, at least for now.

It had been a lot of years since John had been in a firefight. He had forgotten how intense they could be at first, but the old memories and feelings came flooding back.

\_I'm too old for this\_, he thought while looking over once again at Andrea. He saw her turn, giving him a small smile as she reloaded her rifle. He smiled in return and then refocused his attention, looking out the firing port in the armored window shutter. He knew that the alien's force size was at least twenty in size. From the body count that he could see, he figured that between Andrea and him, they had taken out at least seven of the alien bastards. He knew that they were on borrowed time and that eventually the aliens would get into the house. He just wanted to make the bastards pay a steep price.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

'Mantakree was trying hard to keep his anger in control. He had dropped into this apparent deserted location with twenty-four warriors and now a third of them were lying dead on this cursed ground. The survivors of his unit had surrounded the building where the firing was coming from and were slowly reducing it, but it wasn't fast enough for his taste.

He signaled to one of his surviving lieutenants and over the com system gave him the following orders.

"'Inanrareeâ€| Take your assault team around to the back of this building and use your plasma grenades to gain entry and eliminate the defenders. We will continue firing to distract them from your

attackâ€| Understood?"

"Understood, sir!" the lieutenant responded back.

"Keep firing!" Mantakree shouted as he watched the five warriors move towards the back of the building to begin their attack.

The Sangheili intensified their fire on the farm houseâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

John ducked down as the alien's weapons fire intensified on the house. He watched as Andrea continued to pop up, to the firing port, firing another burst. He couldn't have been more proud of his granddaughter at seeing how she was handling herself at this moment, but it was tinged with sadness and regret as he knew how this was going to end for them.

A thought suddenly popped into John's head as he realized why the aliens were firing harder now.

\_Damn it! How could I've been so stupid and careless!\_

He got up as fast as his old body could, moving towards the living room of the house. The farm house wasn't that big and as he made his way quickly to the other side of the house, he could still hear Andrea firing in the kitchen. He just entered the living room and started moving towards the armored shuttered window when the room exploded with a huge roar. Even in his old age and with his body protesting, old instincts and training took over and John found himself doing a diving combat roll behind a large sofa, coming up with his MA5 ready.

It was just in time as the first two Elites rushed through the breach in the wall. John didn't hesitate as he unloaded a full magazine into both aliens cutting them down. He saw the ammo counter on the assault rifle drop to zero and quickly reached for a spare magazine. Another two aliens came through the breach and John's heart sank as he knew that he wasn't going to be fast enough. Suddenly shots rang out and both aliens fell to the ground. He turned his head and saw Andrea standing in the doorway with her battle rifle smoking. He heard the click of her empty rifle as she had emptied her weapon into the aliens. Everything appeared to be moving in slow motion as he watched her start to eject the empty magazine while reaching for a full one. He felt himself start to let out a huge breath of relief out when he saw her eyes widen in fear, his head whipped around in that direction, back towards the hole in the wall, in time to see a huge alien come storming in.

John didn't hesitate. He still hadn't reloaded his MA5, but he charged anyway screaming obscenities at the alien holding his assault rifle as a club. He swung wildly at the alien, but it easily deflected his blow and countered by swinging with its arm, catching John on the side of the head. He flew across the room landing in a corner in a heap.

Tasting blood in his mouth, John felt every bone, joint and all his muscles ache and throb in pain. He heard Andrea scream.

"GRANDPA! "

He felt someone touching him gently. Through his hazy vision he saw Andrea looking at him with fear and concern showing on her face. In the background he saw the menacing hulk of the alien start moving towards them.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Andrea saw her grandfather get struck by the huge alien and sent flying across the room. The first thought that went through her mind was that he was dead. In that moment she lost it, he was all she had left and she didn't know what she would do if he was gone. Rushing to him, she let out a sigh seeing that he was still alive. Then reality came crashing down at the realization that the alien was still in the room. She turned slowly seeing the alien staring at them in the corner of the room. The alien let out a huge angry roar. A part of her mind noted that this was the first time she had seen an alien up close in person.

\_So this is what they call an Eliteâ€| So much bigger than what the vidcasts showed them to be\_, she thought in a detached mindset as she realized that they were about to die.

With growing horror, she watched as the alien reached to its side, pulling off a curved piece of metal off its belt and pressing a button on it. The sound of plasma coalescing into a sinister blade shape thundered in her ears causing her to shudder. She found that she couldn't help but stare at the shimmering plasma sword blade as the Elite came closer to her and her grandfather. Andrea grabbed and held on tightly to her grandfather. She could feel her body tensing up in fear. She found herself hoping that it would be quick.

She was so focused on the approaching plasma blade that she didn't hear the loud sharp buzz saw sound. It took her a moment to realize what was happening as the alien fell to the ground dead in front of them. She looked dumbfounded at the dead alien lying on the floor and she finally looked back up at the hole in the wall. She was shocked at the sight of a huge armored man-shaped creature carrying a MA5 standing in the opening. It looked like a robot with its golden visor helmet and a barely legible "113" on its pitted and scorched armored chest.

She could feel this new creature staring at her and her grandfather and that it was checking them out. It felt like time had stopped, but then the moment was broken as a very tired human sounding voice spoke from the robot.

"It looks like I got here just in timeâ€| "

17. I still have a choiceâ€|

\*\*CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:\*\*

\*\*I still have a choiceâ€| \*\*

\*\*New Constantinople  
>December 3, 2536 â€" 2148 Local Time<strong>

Michael looked over the young woman and old man that were in the corner of the room. The Pelican had detected the Covenant dropships and he had the Pelican drop him off several clicks further out. He had started a slow approach towards the farm, but his audio sensors had detected the human and Covenant weapons fire. Moving quickly, he came up on a large number of Elite Special Operations soldiers that were spread out firing at a farm house.

The Elites were spread out and their attention was focused on the farm house. That made it easier for him to take them out as he moved quickly and silently taking out the Elites one by one using his combat knife. The only trouble he had was with the unit leader, who belatedly realized what was happening to his soldiers. Michael managed to finish off the unit leader as he heard an explosion come from the back of the house followed by weapons fire. There was no hesitation on his part as he rushed to the scene, arriving just in time to finish off the last Elite with a short burst from his MA5.

Michael continued to study the young woman and old man. He had immediately recognized that the old man was John Larson â€“ his mission target. A hundred different thoughts ran through his mind and the doubt started to surface again. He had found his target and he could end this mission quickly and get back to base. The thought of ending the mission quickly was tempting, but what came out of his mouth caught him by surprise.

"Is he going to be alright?"

Michael noted that the young woman was in her late teens to early twenties with auburn hair cut short. The young woman shook herself out of her trance of staring at Michael, immediately turning to check out the older man. The old man groaned loudly, shaking his head and waving the young woman away.

"I'll be fine Andreaâ€|" John paused as he focused on the huge man-shaped robot standing in the remnants of his living room, "Who the hell are you?" he asked as he leaned over, spitting some blood out on to the floor.

Smirking inside his helmet, Michael could see that Larson seemed to be taking everything that had happened to him in stride and keeping a cool demeanor.

"I'm from the UNSCâ€|" Michael started to say, noticing that Laron's face immediately took on a tense look. He found that looking at Larson and the young woman that his doubt and questions about these ONI missions was growing. He knew his duty and that he had his orders, but he was questioning again why he was here and the reasoning behind it. These people were just at risk as anyone else from the Covenant.

\_They're humanâ€\_|\_ Michael thought as he tried again to understand why his own species had the propensity to tear at itself when the Covenant were the greater threat.

His thoughts continued down that path and he suddenly realized that John and Andrea were staring at him. Michael could see a hopeful look on Andrea's face. He noted that the young woman was showing a lot of

concern for Larson and he figured that she must be related to Larson in some way. Michael gave his head an internal shake as he had to refocus on the current situation.

"Is there anyone else around?" Michael asked.

"Noâ€| It's just my Grandpa and me," Andrea responded.

Michael made a mental note that Andrea was Larson's granddaughter, filing it away.

"What about those Covenant bastards?" John spoke with the anger obvious in his voice.

Michael replied with no hesitation, "They're all neutralized. This area is secure for now, but there is a lot of Covenant activity in this sector."

"You took out all those Covenant by yourself?" John asked somewhat incredulously.

Michael nodded, seeing Larson's eyebrows raise at hearing that the Covenant strike team had been all eliminated by one soldier.

"So what now?" John asked with some apprehension at his situation going from facing off against the Covenant to now being in the UNSC's hands.

\_Yeahâ€| So what do you do now?\_

Michael pondered the question as he looked at the old man and his granddaughter. The internal struggle surfaced as the images of his interrogation of Anders replayed through his mind. Anders hanging from that tree nakedâ€| the tortureâ€| his throat cut with blood streaming outâ€| the throat that Michael had cut. Michael was young in terms of physical age, but he had more than enough combat experience to know that doing this type of operational work was messy. He was very good at this work, but it was like a cancer that was starting to eat at his soul. He feared that he would lose what little of his humanity that he felt he had left if he continued down this path.

\_Maybe the Master Chief is rightâ€| Maybe it is better to just disconnect yourself and not feelâ€| John was always focused on the mission.\_

In those brief moments, thoughts flowed through his mind and his ongoing struggle to follow orders versus what his duty should be raged. In true Spartan manner, he quickly decided on his course of action.

\_I still have a choiceâ€| As long as I have that I'm still normalâ€| whatever that is.\_

"We get the hell out of hereâ€| I'll call in a Pelican for pickup and we get a lift back to one of the evacuation areas," Michael answered.

He could see the looks of relief come to both John and Andrea's faces at his response. Michael opened a com channel to the

Pelican.

"Pelican-287â€| This is Sierra-113â€| Do you read me? I need a pickup at map co-ordinates Romeo-23 by Juliett-41 using my beaconâ€| Come in Pelican-287..."

Michael waited for a moment, finally the com channel responded with heavy static and a voice that was somber as it responded.

"Sierra-113â€| This is Pelican-287â€| Negative on that pickup! We have heavy Covenant air activity in this whole sector and we've had to fall back. No go on alternate pickup site due to Covenant activityâ€|"

\_Shitâ€| It doesn't get any easier does it\_, Michael thought as he now had to deal with a new set of circumstances and problems.

With all the Covenant air activity, using any ground vehicles would be out of the question, this would have to be done on foot. Using his memory he quickly visualized the map that he had memorized for this mission and plotted potential routes to clear this sector. He calculated roughly how long it would take at "normal" human walking speeds to get to the spot he picked that should clear them of the Covenant air threat.

Michael looked at John, "How well do you know the terrain to the south-west of here?" he asked.

John didn't hesitate, "I know it like the back of my handâ€| There are some trails through thereâ€| Some forestâ€| low brush with rolling hillsâ€| Can be rough if you don't know what you're doingâ€| What's wrong?"

"All the Covenant activity in the area is making it impossible for the Pelican to come in and pick us upâ€| We can't risk using the roads and the only way is to walk out towards the south-west. If it was just me, I could cover the distance in about a day, but you and your granddaughter would take six maybe seven days walking," Michael responded.

"What about if we used the horses?" Andrea blurted out.

This caught Michael off guard, but then he realized he was on a farm and if there were horses, John and Andrea could use them and the other benefit would be that the horses could also be loaded to carry supplies for the trip. This changed the situation and things started to look somewhat improved and a small smile came to his face inside his helmet. Michael did some quick mental calculations taking Andrea's suggestion into account.

Michael keyed the com channel again, "Pelican-287â€| Looks like we are walking out of hereâ€| New pickup zone is at map co-ordinates Tango-23 by Juliett-40â€| ETA is seventy-two hours and forty-three minutesâ€| Repeat schedule pickup for three days from my mark. I will provide burst updates on eight hour scheduleâ€| Do you copy Pelican-287?"

"We copy you Sierra-113â€| We will forward updated pickup co-ordinates to command and will arrange to be on station at

designated timeâ€| Good luck Sierra-113."

Michael cut the com channel, turning to face the others, "We need to pack up enough food and water for four days and get those horses loaded and move out of here ASAP as the Covenant will be here trying to figure out what happened to their strike team and I don't think we want to be around here when they arrive."

John nodded his understanding of their dilemma and quickly took control of the situation, "Andreaâ€| Grab the packs and load up quicklyâ€| I'll get the weapons and extra ammoâ€|"

"Uhâ€| "

John and Andrea stopped and turned towards Michael, "What? You don't expect us to head out with the area swarming with Covenant unarmedâ€| Do you?" John said using his old command tone.

Michael had been caught off-guard by the weapons, but he had seen how the two of them had held off the Elites and he didn't want them to be defenseless, so it did make some sense for them to be armed.

"Noâ€| No I don't," Michael replied little sheepishly.

"Well thenâ€| Let's get a move onâ€| We're wasting time here," John said bending down to pick up and inspect his MA5.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Major Oan 'Valisee looked over the remains of the battle. He tried to maintain his composure as he looked at the dead bodies of his fellow Sangheili warriors that laid strewn around the human compound. He knelt down beside the lifeless body of Khurn 'Mantakree and tried to control his grieve and rage at seeing his closest comrade dead. A lifetime of memories flowed through 'Valisee's mind as he looked at his dead comrade. They had served together for years since they had come of age and entered military service. It had been him that had recommended Khurn for his promotion and command of this unit.

'Valisee's unit had been at another location trying to locate the demon when Khurn's unit missed their status check in. They had come as quickly as they could, but they had arrived too late and now he was left looking at the body of the Sangheili that he regarded as close as any brother.

Oan touched the top of Khurn's head and tried to not look at the rest of the mangled body. He lowered his head and said a brief Sangheili prayer. The grieving would come later as there was still much work nowâ€| There was also now a blood debt that needed to be settled.

"Sirâ€| "

'Valisee was brought back to the moment as his second-in-command spoke up in a respectful tone as he slowly stood up, turning to face his underling.

"Report Toha."

"I didn't want to disturb you sir, but I felt that you should know what we have foundâ€|"

'Valisee waved his lieutenant to continue his report as he tried to push the image of Khurn's lifeless body from his mind.

\_He is on his own great journey nowâ€| That is only an empty shell nowâ€|\_

"Sirâ€| We examined the buildings and found tracksâ€| It appears that there were at least three humans and they appeared to have taken some pack animals and have headed out towards the south west quadrant."

'Valisee detected in his lieutenant's voice that there was more to his report, "What is it Toha?"

"We identified one of the sets of tracksâ€| They belong to the demonâ€|"

'Valisee felt his anger build up and it took all of his self-control to keep from roaring out.

"How much of a head start do they have?" 'Valisee said trying to control his anger.

"We estimate they have at least a four hour head start."

"Gather the menâ€| We will pursueâ€| Now!"

"Sirâ€| Should we not report this information and co-ordinate with our other units and bring in air patrols?"

"NO!" 'Valisee said as his grief exploded out and his lieutenant drew back.

"This demon is MINE! I have a blood debt to repay and we will track the human down and I will stand over its dead carcass pulling my energy sword from its bodyâ€| Now gather the men and we will start our pursuit while we still have light on this cursed planet!"

The Sangheili quickly nodded and went to gather the rest of the strike team to track and pursue the humans, leaving 'Valisee to think dark thoughts about what he was going to do to the demon.

## 18. What's your name?

\*\*CHAPTER EIGHTEEN:\*\*

\*\*What's your name?\*\*

\*\*New Constantinople  
>December 4, 2536 â€" 0158 Local Time<strong>

It was twilight and the light was finally fading as the summer season on this part of New Constantinople provided light late into the night. John Larson watched as the strange soldier led Andrea and him on the trail. They had rushed and grabbed all the supplies they could find and headed to the barn. John had offered the soldier a horse,

but he had declined as he said that the horse wouldn't be able to support his weight, plus he said it wouldn't be a problem for him to keep up.

John had been doubtful and thought the soldier had been boasting, but here he was leading their group and setting a punishing pace for both humans and animals. John took a look over at Andrea and could see her fighting to stay awake on the horse.

\_She's crashingâ€| Too much has happened and she's never been in combat before.\_

John looked towards the soldier. He had studied the soldier and had noted that he was wearing a strange armor configuration the likes he had never seen in his years of service. The soldier looked like he was an ODST, but only bigger and more dangerous. Any man that could walk into the middle of firefight and take out a whole enemy strike team wasn't anyone you trifled with. John had been on enough special-ops missions during his service with the marines to recognize a professionalâ€| \_a real killer\_â€| when he saw it.

John noted that since they had left the farm, the soldier had barely said anything to him or Andrea other than provide occasional directions as they moved along the trail. It was eerily quiet except for the sound of the occasional animal scurrying away.

\_Even the animals know that the world is ending\_, John thought somberly as the attack on the farm only seemed to emphasize to him that the Covenant would soon kill and destroy everything and everyone on the planet.

John almost missed it as he saw out of the corner of his eye that Andrea had finally passed out from exhaustion and was going to fall from her horse. Before even John could cry out, the soldier had moved with reflexes and speed that he didn't think were humanly possible, catching Andrea before she hit the ground.

John just sat in his saddle stunned, with his mouth open, looking at the armored soldier as he gently set Andrea on the ground. He saw the soldier turn his head, looking at him. He couldn't see the soldier's face through the gold helmet visor, but he knew that he was looking at himâ€|he could feel it.

"We'll stop for a rest," the soldier said.

John was still stunned, from what he had witnessed, to say anything and all he could do was nod his head as he dismounted, moving quickly to check on his granddaughter.

Michael watched as John checked out Andrea, it had been his quick reflexes that had allowed him to react and catch her before she hit the ground. He gave his head a little shake at how sideways this mission had gone.

\_Adapt and overcomeâ€|\_ Michael thought as he tried to figure out what to do next. He wanted to keep moving. Even though he knew he could keep up this pace, he realized that John, Andrea and the horses probably could use the rest.

"Is she going to be alright?" Michael asked.

"Yeahâ€| It's just exhaustion and shockâ€| She just needs some rest," John responded.

"We'll wait until sunrise and then get moving again."

"Why the rush? We seem to be clear of the Covenant."

"I'll feel better when we get to the pickup zoneâ€| I've just got a bad feeling and I've learned to go with my feelings," replied Michael.

"You know this is the most you've said since the farmâ€| You're not much of a talker, are you?" John said still trying to figure out this soldier and his situation.

John was surprised when he heard the voice from inside the armor suit chuckle, "There's not much call for talking in my line of work."

This brought a small smile to John's face, but it slowly faded, "Why were you at the farm? I don't think it was happy circumstance that you just happened to arrive when you did."

There was a long pause and John felt uncomfortable having that gold visor helmet stare at him.

"I think we both know why I was thereâ€|" came the reply in a flat tone.

John sighed and felt his shoulders slump in exhaustion.

\_I'm too old for thisâ€|\_

"So what now? What happens to us?" John asked resigned to his fate, but his main concern was for Andrea.

"How about we get to the pickup zone first and then we figure out what happens next."

The reply caught John off guard, suddenly seeing a glimmer of hope at the end of the dark tunnel they were currently stuck in.

A thought suddenly came to John as he had been so caught up in Andrea's and his circumstances, "You said you had a bad feelingâ€| What makes you think that?"

"It's all the Covenant air activity in this sector and that group of Elites at your farm. That was no simple assault teamâ€| That was a Special Operations team and they don't send them out into the wild on a whim. They were on a specific mission."

"Mission? There's nothing of military value in this areaâ€| Just a few small towns and farms," John said now getting a bad feeling too.

"That's what worries meâ€|" Michael replied.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Major Oan 'Valisee stood in the small clearing pacing back and forth as his unit rested. He had made his unit set a hard pace following the tracks left by the demon, but the trail got harder to follow in the dark and the terrain didn't make it any easier.

'Valisee finally relented to his lieutenant's advice that they rest and wait until light to pick up the trail again. He knew that it made sense, but his blood burned at the thought of that demon being out there and Khurn's death being unavenged.

\_Soon demonâ€| Soonâ€|\_ 'Valisee thought with burning hate as he paced, waiting for the sun to rise.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

John finally managed to close his eyes and get some troubled rest. It felt like he had only been asleep for a minute when he felt someone lightly shake him on the shoulder. Opening his eyes groggily, he was greeted by the gold visor helmet of the soldier. The old man stirred as he became aware of his surroundings.

"What's wrong?" John said as he immediately began to worry and started to reach for his MA5.

"Nothing's wrongâ€| Sunrise is in less than an hour and we should be moving."

"Okayâ€| I'll wake Andrea and we can get moving," John said nodding.

A few minutes later Andrea was awake. She was still exhausted and ached, but was feeling better than she did a few hours earlier. Her grandfather had opened up a couple of ration packs and they had a cold meal. It didn't taste that great, but Andrea found she was famished as she gobbled it down.

Michael watched Andrea and John eat and get ready to mount the horses to continue on. It was strange watching the two interact and Michael couldn't help but watch them as they seemed to be very close to each other. It seemed all foreign to him to have that sort of bond. Of course he did have a close bond with his brother and sister Spartans and they were "sort" of a family, but they had been thrown together by the Spartan-II program selection process and they had become close out of necessity and the endurances and dangers they'd had shared together.

Michael caught Andrea looking towards him. He just gazed towards them as his thoughts continued to wander, but the two people couldn't tell as he still had his helmet on. He watched as Andrea said something to her grandfather and stood up and walked over to him. Andrea approached with a little hesitation in her walk, stopping when she got within five feet of him.

"Would you like something to eat?" she asked.

"Noâ€| I'm fine."

She hesitated as she started to turn away, but then turned back, "I just want to say thank you for what you did for usâ€|back at the farm."

This caught Michael a little off guard and he couldn't find his voice for a moment, "You don't need to thank me."

Andrea looked directly at the soldier's visor vainly hoping she was making eye contact with him, "Iâ€œ I know it wasn't a coincidence you showing up at our farmâ€œ My grandfather thinks I don't know who and what he is involved with. I don't pretend to understand all the politics and I have every reason to hate the UNSC, but I don't hate them or what you represent. I just wanted you to know that. My grandfather is a good man and served the UNSCâ€œ"

Michael interrupted her, "It's not my job to judgeâ€œ I do my duty."

"I knowâ€œ I just wanted you to know who my grandfather is and I wanted to say thank you."

Michael watched as Andrea turned and walked back to her grandfather. He was venturing again into that grey territory and it always bothered him being in these situations.

\_It's always so much easier and clearer fighting the Covenant\_, he thought with a sigh.

They broke camp soon after and once again Michael set a hard pace as they continued on their journey to the LZâ€œ

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The journey seemed to move like a blur as the group fell into a monotonous routine of moving hard and then stopping, usually at John's request to rest the horses, then moving again and then stopping for a cold meal and a few hours' sleep and then starting the whole process over again. During the rest stops, John and Andrea would rest quietly together having their cold meal. Michael would sit off by himself after doing a quick perimeter walk.

Everything was going smoothly and they were setting a good pace to get to the LZ within the allotted time. This was starting to bother Michael.

\_It's going too smoothâ€œ There was a Special Ops team at the farm and now nothingâ€œ only the distant rumbling of the fighting and the occasional Phantom or Banshee flying way off in the distantâ€œ It doesn't feel rightâ€œ\_

Michael was actually feeling on edge and several times he detoured the group to backtrack and circle around to throw off any potential pursuit. Michael's behavior was starting to bother John and Andrea.

John found himself approaching the soldier sitting once again off by himself. As he approached he tried once again to study the soldier using everything he had observed and he still found himself dealing with an enigma.

\_I've worked with lone wolf operators beforeâ€œ most of those guys were grade-A certified psychos who enjoyed the killingâ€œ This guy is differentâ€œ\_

The soldier had already turned towards John as he approached as there appeared no way to sneak up on this soldier.

"Do you have a moment?" John asked.

"Yesâ€| Is there anything wrong?"

"Noâ€| Nothing really more of a concernâ€| Can we talk?"

There was a long pause and John could see the soldier shift as if he was uncomfortable dealing with social conversations.

"What's concerning you?"

"Are you alright? Our pace has been very hard, even by marine standards," John said with a slight smirk.

"I just want to make sure we get to the LZ in one piece."

"You still have that bad feeling?"

"Yesâ€| It's still nagging at me."

"You could be wrong about it."

John was surprised when he heard a chuckle come from the armored soldier, "I've learned to listen to my feelingsâ€| It's one of the things that's kept me alive so far."

John nodded as he could understand the superstitions of soldiers as he'd had some of his own when he had served. John got up slowly as his body ached.

"How much further to the pickup point?"

"We'll be there in less than 12 hoursâ€| Plenty of time."

"Then what? I'm ready and willing to face what I've done. My first and only concern is about Andreaâ€| She's the only family I have left."

Michael sighed as he knew that this was coming and he'd hoped to put this off for as long as possible. It had been one of the things that had also been bothering him.

\_Maybe that's what's putting me on edgeâ€| I don't want to face what is going to happen and what I might have to doâ€|\_

Michael looked at the old man and over at his granddaughter that was huddled up trying to stay warm. He looked again at the old man, this time looking into his face and eyes. Even in the dim light he could see pain in those eyes. They had seen loss on a personal level. There was some anger and hate in there, but it was mostly loss.

\_Damn you ONIâ€| Why do I feel so dirty?\_

Michael sighed, "How about we make a deal? You give me the information I needâ€| I get you and your granddaughter off-planet."

John snorted, "You've got that kind of pull? Just like thatâ€|we both get off planet."

"I won't lie to you. It won't be easy, but I give you my word. I'll get you both off planet."

John couldn't see the soldier's face inside the helmet, but he heard the tone of his voice and he believed the soldier would keep his word.

John shook his head slowly, "I believe you when you say that you'll keep your wordâ€| But I gave my word to my people that I would protect them. I'm sorry son. I can't give you the info you want."

"You're not making things easy for meâ€|are you?"

This actually brought a smile and chuckle from John, "I wouldn't be doing my job if I made it easy for youâ€|would I?"

John heard the soldier snort and for some reason it reminded him of someone, "Noâ€| I guess you wouldn't."

John was struck by a strange sense of dÃ©jÃ vu, that he'd had this same conversation before, but he couldn't place it. He shrugged it off, turning to leave. He paused one more time.

"Can I ask you one more question?"

"Sureâ€|"

"What's your name?"

The soldier paused for a long moment as if he didn't understand the question and John thought he wasn't going to answer.

The soldier finally responded, "My name is Michaelâ€|"

John nodded, "That's a good strong name. My grandson's name was Michael."

"What happened to him?"

"He diedâ€| He died a long time agoâ€|"

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The next morning the small group found itself moving once again setting their steady pace. Michael had pushed down his nagging feeling and rather than doing any further backtracking they went for a straight approach for the pickup point.

\_The sooner we get thereâ€|the sooner we get out of hereâ€|\_

Michael still didn't know what he was going to do about the old man, but he didn't want to toss him to an ONI interrogation teamâ€|it didn't feel right. The one decision he had come to was that he would get Andrea off-planet. He would tell John when they reached the LZ about his decision.

\_It can wait until thenâ€\_|\_

They would make one more rest stop and then they would be at the LZ and then picked up by the Pelican. It seemed just that simpleâ€\_|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Major 'Valisee had driven his unit almost to the point of exhaustion, but they had maintained their pace and had almost caught up to the demon and his group. Several times they had almost lost the trail as the demon had backtracked, but they now had a clear trail to follow and this re-energized the Major in his quest for revenge.

"Sirâ€\_| Can we rest the men for a few minutes?" his Lieutenant asked hesitantly.

"NO! We're closeâ€\_| They can rest after we have killed the demon. Maintain this pace! We are very close!"

"Yes, sir."

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

John was sitting next to Andrea as they took their last rest break before they got to the LZ. He studied his granddaughter's face.

"What is it?" she asked curiously as she caught him looking at her.

"You look so much like your mother, but you have your father's eyes."

"What's wrong?" as she picked up on his tone causing her to worry more.

He started to lie, but he realized it wasn't fair to her. She needed to hear the truth.

"I don't know what's going to happen to us after we leave here. I've done thingsâ€\_| I worked with people that I once took an oath to protect againstâ€\_|"

"Grandpa! You don't have toâ€", " she started to say.

He cut her off, "I won't apologize for what I've doneâ€\_| Those are my decisions and I have to live with them and whatever happens to meâ€\_| I've had a long life. I just want to say how proud I am of you and that I love you."

"Please don't talk like that," Andrea said as she felt tears come to her eyes.

John touched his granddaughter's face gently, "Your mom and dad would be so proud of you and how you have turned out."

Andrea hugged her grandfather tightly and he returned the hug with all his love. The moment would have lasted, except it was suddenly

interrupted as the horses started acting funny.

"What's wrong?" Andrea asked as she looked towards the horses.

"I don't knowâ€|?" John said as he stood up also looking towards the horses.

I've got a bad feeling about thisâ€| Maybe Michael was right, he thought.

He turned to where Michael had been sitting away from them, but he was no longer there. He had vanished.

"Where the hell did heâ€|"

John never finished his sentence as a shot rang out and he felt a sudden pain in his side. He found his vision blurring and he suddenly couldn't stand.

"GRANDPA!"

John heard Andrea screaming and he felt himself being dragged across the ground. The forest erupted in more firing as energy weapons fired and the more familiar sound of human automatic weapons. He tried raising his head as pain flared from his side through his body. He was finally able to raise his head enough and could see Andrea crouched behind some rocks. She was firing her MA5 towards the trees, shots replied back hitting around her as she ducked for cover.

He heard loud roars and then there were several large explosions in the trees and the shooting towards Andrea was lesseningâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael was sitting taking a break. He was still trying to deal with what he was going to do once they got to the LZ. He was torn. John was not your typical "Innie", but at the same time he was still fighting against the UNSC.

It never gets easierâ€| does it?

Michael's thoughts were interrupted as he heard the horses get very restless. He suddenly got a very bad feeling. He didn't hesitate as he moved quickly into the trees to circle around.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

'Valisee cursed, "Where did the demon go?" as his soldiers opened fire. He saw an older human male and a younger female get to cover. The male was obviously hurt, but the female was firing back. He signaled to two of his soldiers to sweep around and take her from behind. He continued looking through the tree for the demon.

Where are you demon? You can't hide from meâ€|

His thoughts were interrupted as explosions tore through the forestâ€|

\_I have you nowâ€|\_

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael had come across a couple of Elites that were trying to circle around. He took them out with a quick burst from his MA5. He changed direction to move deeper and sweep around the Covenant. His motion tracker started picking up more hostile targets. He quickly located them, the Elites were focused firing on John and Andrea. He hoped they were okay, but his main worry was taking care of the enemy otherwise nobody was going to be around to make it to the LZ.

Pulling a frag grenade from his suit, he armed it and tossed it at an Elite's position. He moved on as the grenade exploded taking out the enemyâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Andrea changed the magazine on her assault rifle, she knew that her grandfather was hurt bad, but there was nothing she could do for him right now as she tried to fight off the Covenant attack. She didn't know where the soldier had run off too, but then she saw the explosions in the woods and heard another MA5 firing. The alien fire against her was decreasing, but it still was intense.

She glanced over at her grandfather and could see him trying to sit up, "Grandpa! Stay down!"

She could see the left side of his body soaked in blood. She needed to stop his bleeding, but the first-aid kit with the bio-foam was with the horses and she couldn't get to them as it was too wide open.

John couldn't feel any pain, his left side felt numb. He heard Andrea yell for him to stay down, but he needed to help her.

\_I'm so tiredâ€| It's hard to focusâ€| There was something I needed to doâ€|\_

Somehow he made it on to his knees and managed to start crawling towards Andrea. Automatic weapons roared and explosions thundered around him as he found the strength to keep moving. He stopped to catch his breath, wiping the sweat from his forehead smearing blood across his face with his blood-soaked hand. His mind was wandering and losing track of reality.

\_Getting hard to breatheâ€| Andrea needs meâ€| Why is Sonia standing over there? She looks just as beautiful as the day we metâ€| God, I've missed herâ€|\_

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael was surrounded by the few Elites left and firing in all directions. Bullets and plasma shots streaked past each other looking for targets. He felt plasma shots impact on his armor and could feel the heat burn through, but he pushed the pain to the back of his mind as he fired another burst.

His shots struck an Elite throwing him back. Before Michael could

turn an Elite came howling out of some bushes at full speed barreling into him. Michael got hit full on by the rampaging Elite. He should have flown backwards, but he managed to grab on to the Elite's body harness catching him off guard and they both tumbled out of control grappling with each other as they rolled out of the trees back into the open area where John and Andrea were taking cover.

Michael freed up his right hand and punched the alien hard in the side of the head. As he punched the Elite, he rolled away from the alien and got to his feet. The alien recovered quickly and was trying to get to his feet. Michael wasn't going to give him a chance to recover and go for his plasma sword. He charged the Elite catching it hard in his mid-section with his armored shoulder. Michael could hear the Elite grunt hard and the air escaping from his lungs as they flew almost ten feet from the hit. Michael managed to control the fall, staying on top. The Elite was hitting his helmet with one of his free hands while trying to reach for his plasma sword with the other hand. Michael wrapped his armored gloves around the Elite's throat and started to squeezeâ€!

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Andrea was shocked when the soldier and an alien came flying out of the woods, she tried to shoot the alien, but she didn't have a clear shot. Two more Elites came out of the woods and were turning to fire at the soldier, she quickly opened up with her MA5 hitting one, causing him to fall. The other Elite managed to dive for cover and he and Andrea exchanged fire. She was too preoccupied fending off that alien that she missed another Elite come out of the woods near where the soldier and Elite were fightingâ€!

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

'Valisee's rage boiled over. The demon and the other humans had killed most of his unit. He saw his faithful Lieutenant Toha engaged in hand to hand combat with the demon. The Major could see that his Lieutenant was losing as the demon had managed to gain the advantage and was strangling him.

\_The demon is distractedâ€! His back is to me! Time to die demon!\_

'Valisee drew his plasma sword as he moved quickly to cover the distance towards the demon to collect on his blood debtâ€!

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael was squeezing the Elite's neck hard and could hear it gasping for air. The alien slapped the side of Michael's helmet hard causing him to wince, but he maintained the pressure. He could still hear firing, but he couldn't worry about that now. The Elite's eyes bulged and Michael could see the life leaving them as the hitting slowed down and stopped. Michael was breathing hard and was trying to reorient himself as he had become so engrossed in killing this Elite that he had lost his situational awareness. Suddenly a scream echoed through the woods bringing him back to his senses. It was a female screaming and his first thought was something had happened to Andrea. He turned quickly and was shocked by what he sawâ€!

He saw an Elite removing a plasma sword from John's body. He saw the old man fall to the ground as the Elite started to move towards him.

Michael felt rage at the sight. He got up in a flash, charging the advancing Elite, screaming.

"YOU BASTARD!"

'Valisee had been moving on the unaware demon when an old human male threw himself into his path. He had been shocked as he saw that the male was covered in blood on one side. 'Valisee couldn't believe that this dying human dared to confront him. He wouldn't be denied his vengeance and he didn't hesitate as he impaled the old man with his plasma sword. He saw the human's eyes and could tell he was dying, but he saw the look of defiance in those eyes and it caused him to pause for a moment. That's when he heard the human female scream and then he heard the demon scream at him as it got up and charged himâ€|

Michael charged the Elite, the alien swung his plasma sword trying to catch him in his torso, but Michael's blood was boiling and his reflexes reacted almost anticipating what the Elite was going to do. The Elite only caught empty air as Michael spun and got in close. As he got in close, he brought his forearm up hard and fast catching the alien in the head. The Elite staggered backwards roaring, but Michael didn't give it a chance to recover as he continued his assault, this time punching the alien with an uppercut causing the alien to fly backwards. Michael jumped on top of the Elite, punching it in the head over and over again. He finally pulled his combat knife from his shoulder scabbard. With both hands, he drove the blade into the alien's throat.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Andrea ran over to where her grandfather was lying on the ground. She hadn't seen the alien come out of the trees, but she caught some movement out of the corner of her eye and she managed to turn to look on in shock as somehow her grandfather had found the strength to move and try to block the Elite from attacking the soldier from behind. She saw the wound and this time she couldn't deny it to herself that he wasn't going to make it.

"Grandpaâ€| Why? Why did you do that?" she sobbed quietly while kneeling next to him.

John knew he was going to die. He could feel his life draining away. He heard Andrea talking to him, but he couldn't make out what she was saying. He had seen the alien moving to attack Michael from behind and he couldn't let that happen. If Michael died then Andrea wouldn't make it. It made sense and it was an easy decision to make.

He was looking up at the sky. He could see Andrea's face looking down at him, but it was starting to fade. There was so much to say to her still. He turned his head and could see Michael stand up from the dead Elite, moving towards them. It was funny, Andrea was fading, but he could see Michael clearlyâ€|

\_There's Sonia againâ€| She's waving to meâ€| There's David and his wifeâ€| There's so many people that I know and served withâ€| I

haven't seen them for such a long timeâ€| I've missed them allâ€| I'm so tiredâ€| I want to go to herâ€| Where's my grandsonâ€| He should be there tooâ€| Everybody else is there waiting for meâ€|\_

John turned his head again to look up at the sky, seeing Andrea's face again becoming clearer. He then saw the gold visor of the soldier's helmet looking down at him. It was at that moment that the realization hit him as the universe reveled its secrets to him in this final moment. He didn't understand how or why, but it was the knowing as the old man somehow found his last ounce of strength, reaching with his hand and grabbing Michael's armored gloved hand and placing it on Andrea's hand. John smiled and managed to whisper one final word with his final breath.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael watched the old man die and found it hard to believe that he was dead. He was used to death, but this was something on a more personal level than what he was used too. He was still trying to figure out what the old man was trying to communicate before he died when he took his hand and placed it on Andrea's. He figured that John was asking him to make sure that his granddaughter was safe, but it was John's final word which really struck at him. The old man had only managed to say one word before he died.

\_Michael....

## 19. Babylon Falling

\*\*CHAPTER NINETEEN:\*\*

\*\* "Babylon Falling"\*\*

\*\*New Constantinople  
>December 29, 2536 â€" 1325 Local Time<strong>

New Constantinople was in its final death throesâ€|

The Covenant was pushing in towards the final safe zones. The UNSC Navy was only able to get a pitiful handful of dropships and shuttles into the few remaining evacuation areas, overwhelmed with countless numbers of frightened civilians and soldiers still left on planet.

Michael was still on planet, still fighting to try and inflict as much damage and casualties, on the Covenant, to buy as much time as he could for even one more ship full of people to be evacuated. The remaining defenders had resigned themselves to their fate, but they also fought desperately to buy more time and hurt the Covenant as much as possible. The marines had been stretched past the breaking point, but still fought on. Those civilians willing to carry weapons had been drafted to fill the countless empty spots in the marine ranks. Some had given up while others refused to bow down and not go down without a fight. Either way everyone knew that it was the end.

Michael came out of one of the defense bunkers and looked at the sky. The sun should have been bright and shining, but due to all the smoke the sun was a dull red orb that hung there. The sky seemed to be on

fire and the whole scene seemed to take on a surreal view of what hell might look like. The scene tore at him as he recalled his dreams and wondered if those dreams were a foreshadowing of what was happening now. Michael's thoughts were interrupted as his com system crackled and a very tired voice came over the channel.

"Sierra-113. Provide status update?"

Michael paused for a moment as he continued to look at the sky and the landscape and could see explosions from the fighting not too far away from his position.

"Sierra-113 responding. I'm currently at Defense Bunker Charlie-12. Over."

The tired voice responded, "Command needs you to move to Sector-8. Covenant are making a push and are threatening the landing area in that sector. We have inbound Pelicans for pickup and they can't be diverted. We need to hold that area to get the dropships inâ€|load and then get out. Understood?"

"Understood. I'm on my way. Sierra-113 out."

Michael moved quickly to the sector using his helmet navigation system. He moved at a quick pace as there were no Warthogs available for him to catch a ride with. The few remaining Warthogs and Scorpions were all on the line fighting the Covenant.

Many thoughts ran through Michael's mind as he made his way to the sector and the sounds of fighting became louder and more intense as he got closer.

I hope Andrea made it to Reachâ€| was the last thought as a huge explosion went off nearby causing him to duck and showering him with dirt and debris.

He had used his ONI authorization to pull some strings and got her aboard a Pelican to one of the evac ships three weeks ago. Everything was falling apart and everyone was exhausted, so there hadn't much resistance or checking into his "request" for transport.

He stood up, giving his head a shake to refocus his thoughts on the combat and opened a com channel.

"This is Sierra-113. I'm at the edge of Sector-8. SITREP."

Michael heard the com channel crackle with the sounds of fighting and a desperate, tired voice replied, "Sierra-113. This is Foxtrot Actual. Glad you could join us. We've got Covvies coming at us hard."

"Where do you need me?" Michael replied.

A set of NAV co-ordinates flashed on Michael's helmet HUD and a new waypoint appeared.

"Hook up with 3rd platoon and provide supportâ€| They seem to be getting the worse of it," replied the weary voice.

"ETA to when the Pelicans arrive?" Michael asked as he started

heading towards the waypoint.

"Last report has them coming in on hot approach. 15 minutes to touchdownâ€|"

"You ready to load once they get here?"

"We've got civilians ready to goâ€| We need five minutes to get everyone loaded and the Pelicans can take off."

"So we need to hold for another 20 minutes."

"That's about it and then we can fall back," replied the weary voice.

Michael activated a timer display on his HUD to twenty minutes and started the countdown, so he could keep track. As he got closer to the waypoint on his HUD, he could see the fighting in that area. He could see waves of Grunts streaming towards the marine's defensive positions and the defensive fire was intense, cutting swaths through the Grunt's ranks. Explosions, Human and Covenant weapons fire roared and mixed in there were the screams of both humans and aliens as they were hit. He could also see Jackals moving up firing with their needle rifles and carbines. The marines were redirecting fire on this new threat, but the Jackals were using their energy shields to deflect the defensive fire. Michael opened a com channel.

"Foxtrot-3 this is Sierra-113. Keep concentrating your fire on those Jackals. I'll flank them and catch them in a crossfireâ€|"

"Understoodâ€|" came a terse reply

Michael used his speed to move quickly to get an angle on the approaching wave of Covenant troops. He moved easily over terrain that would have slowed down normal troops. He got into the position he wanted and switched his MA5 out for the battle rifle attached to his back. He did a quick check to make sure he had a full magazine loaded and took aim on the Jackals furthest out as he planned to start at the back and work towards the front, so the front ranks wouldn't know they were getting fire from another position right away and their response would be delayed.

Michael pulled the trigger and the battle rifle fired. He quickly shifted targets as he dropped a Jackal. He was taking out each target he fired at, but then there were so many targets.

He was in the zone as he fired and quickly changed magazines as he emptied them. In the back of his mind he was keeping track of how much ammo he had left for his battle rifle, but he couldn't slacken in his fire as he watched the timer countdownâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Each second felt like a minute and each minute felt like an hour as the fighting raged. Michael was almost out of ammo for his battle rifle and he switched back to his MA5. He saw a large mixed group of Grunts and Jackals making a move and he pulled out and armed a frag grenade, tossing it towards the attacking group. The grenade landed in front of the Covenant, going off and cutting through the leading

aliens causing the others to stop and drop. Michael had planned for this and had followed the first grenade with a second grenade to fall a little further out in among the group of surviving aliens. That grenade went off ripping through the surviving ranks.

Michael was firing short bursts with his MA5 and kept watching the timer countdown. As the timer hit the 14 minute mark, he heard a call over the com channel.

"Heads up everybody! Pelicans are here!"

Michael looked up to the sky and could see a group of fifteen Pelicans come screaming in at high speed. Their approach was going to take them over the fighting and right over his position. He could see how fast the Pelicans were making their approach run and he wasn't sure if they would be able to slow down enough to land safely or just hit the ground at the high speed they were using to avoid fire from the Covenant.

The Pelicans came in fast, but their pilots knew what they were doing as they hit their reverse thrusters at the last second to slow down enough to land in one piece. The landings were rough, but that didn't matter as long as the Pelicans could take-off again.

Michael turned back towards the oncoming Covenant and fired another burst. Just need to hold for a few more minutes, he thought as he continued firing short bursts.

A scream came over the com channel, "JESUS!"

Michael whipped his head around just in time to see two Pelicans explode taking their crews and passengers with them. He saw red balls of plasma arcing through the sky aimed towards the area where the Pelicans had landed.

Wraiths! Damn it! he thought furiously as he used the arcing balls of plasma to try and track back where the Wraiths were firing from. He used his helmet optics and could see the top of a Wraith just barely cresting a low hill.

From the number of plasma shots going out from the position, there had to be at least four Wraiths in that area and that also meant there would probably be support troops there too. Michael didn't hesitate, he plotted his approach on the position and started to make his run.

Going to need some more firepower, Michael thought as he ran.

He skirted the edge of the landing zone on his way to the Wraith's position. The Wraith plasma fire was bracketing the area and another Pelican exploded, but the loading operations were still underway, but it was taking longer than planned due to the fire. As he increased his run to a sprint he snagged a couple of frag grenades and more ammo for his battle rifle, but his luck got better as he came upon the wreckage of a Warthog, lying there beside it was a M19 rocket launcher. Michael hoped it was loaded as he scooped it up without breaking stride. His luck held as there were two rockets loaded as he continued his approach towards the Wraiths.

He finally reached a flanking position and had a clear view of three

of the Wraiths, but he knew that the fourth one was back behind a burned out building. He could see a group of about twenty Grunts with a couple of Elites surrounding the Wraiths.

Only got two shots. Got to make them count, Michael thought as he raised the rocket launcher up and looked through the aiming reticle targeting the middle Wraith. He aimed for the spot where the plasma cannon was mounted and pulled the trigger...

The rocket roared out of the launcher, racing towards its target. Michael's aim was true and the rocket hit dead on causing a huge explosion taking out the Wraith and a few of the surrounding Covenant. Before the first rocket was even half way to its target, Michael had switched his aim to the second Wraith and launched his last rocket. It too found its target and that Wraith went up in a huge explosion.

Michael dropped the rocket launcher and switched to his MA5 and sprinted towards the Covenant to get in closer while they were still off balance. He moved like a blur and it wasn't until he got close that the Covenant realized the threat they were facing and the surviving support troops started firing.

Michael ducked and weaved between the plasma and needle shots; not all shots missed. He could feel the impact of needle rounds on his armor and the heat from plasma round scorching his armor, but there was nothing else he could do. He tossed a frag grenade at a group of Covenant troops, cutting them down with the explosion. The plasma gunners on the two surviving Wraiths started firing wildly, which added to the dangers Michael faced, but the fire was actually hitting some of the support troops or causing them to duck for cover which lessened their fire at the Spartan.

Michael was figuring how to approach the remaining Wraiths when a panicked voice suddenly filled the com channel almost deafening him.

"PERIMETER BREACH! WE'VE GOT COVENANT INSIDE THE PERIMETER!"

Michael swore under his breath and immediately brought up his NAV system to plot a path back to UNSC lines. Off in the distant, he saw the surviving Pelicans straining to gain altitude and escape the firestorm of the fighting.

He left the Wraiths, sprinting quickly to get back to UNSC lines as the fighting seemed to have gotten worse. As he approached, he opened up a com channel to find out where he was needed the most.

"This is Sierra-113| Foxtrot-Actual do you read?" Michael paused as there was nothing but static in response.

"Foxtrot-Three. This is Sierra-113| Do you copy, over?"

Still nothing but static...

"Any UNSC forces. This is Sierra-113| at NAV coordinates Sector 8, Romeo-23, Delta-12| Respond?"

Static still came through the com channel and Michael was at a loss of what to do, when a faint voice finally came through. The voice was

scared and it didn't sound like it was military.

"P-Pleaseâ€| Is there anyone there? The Covenant are slaughtering all the marines. They're inside the refugee areas. They're killing everybodyâ€| Please help usâ€| Pleaseâ€|"

Michael opened a channel to respond, but he didn't get a reply. He quickly set a NAV point back to the refugee areas within the perimeter.

He opened a com channel and broadcasted on all frequencies, "This is Sierra-113 to all surviving UNSC forces. I am moving to cover the refugee areas. Any units able are to provide supportâ€|"

He knew that he was overstepping his authority, but what was the point if all the civilians were slaughtered. He needed to protect them. He moved as fast as he couldâ€|

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael was getting closer to the refugee areas, he had passed by remnants of UNSC units fighting to hold back the Covenant and saw that they couldn't break off to help him. His audio sensors could detect the sounds of heavy plasma fire coming from over a low rising hill ahead of him. He heard another noise, but he couldn't make it out at this distance. He reached the crest of the hill to look down into a small valley that sheltered a refugee area. He wished he hadn'tâ€|

The valley looked like it was on fireâ€| The temporary shelters used by the refugees were on fire. The Covenant, mostly Elites and Brutes, were moving systematically killing every single person. He could make out the sound now that he couldn't earlierâ€| it was the screams of the people as they were slaughtered.

He saw the bodies of men, women, childrenâ€| lying on the ground in the various contortions of dying suddenly and violently. He saw people running everywhere to try and escape the Covenant onslaught. He saw a few marines and civilians with weapons vainly fighting back to try and cover and protect the others.

He looked up at the sky, it looked like it was on fire. A Covenant cruiser was hovering in the sky off in the distance, launching waves of Banshees to sweep in for the final kill. It was like a scene straight out of hell.

\_It's just like my dreams\_, Michael thought as he found himself mesmerized by the scene, but the screams from the people quickly brought him back.

His blood boiled over and he felt his anger grow. Images played through his mindâ€| John Larson dyingâ€| Anders dying by his handâ€| The bodies of Gunny Schmidt and his squad floating dead in spaceâ€|

\_Why? Why did they have to die? What's the point?\_

Another sound caught his attention over the fighting. At first he didn't know what it was, but then he saw it. It was the Brutes laughing. They were laughing as they killed the defenseless

humans.

Something in Michael snapped at that sound. His hands tightened around his MA5, he started moving in what felt like was slow motion down towards the fighting. He didn't have control of himself anymore as he fired his assault rifle, while screaming at the Covenant. He had gotten their attention as Elites and Brutes turned to face the "demon" and moved to attack him.

He quickly emptied magazines, changing them in an automatic reflex. The Covenant was coming at him in waves, but he didn't care as a part of his mind noted he was running out of ammo. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a wrecked Warthog, he tossed a couple of frag grenades and sprinted towards the wreckage. He got there, grabbing the item he wanted. He ripped the M247H heavy machine gun from its mounting. He absently noted that it had a full ammo load. He turned towards the onrushing Covenant. A smile came to his face—a smile that belonged to a predator. Michael pressed the trigger of the HMG and opened up.

Heavy machine gun bullets tore into the ranks of the charging Covenant, he swept back and forth screaming at the aliens as he continued ripping into them with the HMG. The Covenant was like a wave trying to engulf him, but he tore into them with his fire. Their bodies littered the ground around him. They fired every weapon they had at him to bring him down. He either dodged it easily or let his armor absorb the hits. He knew he was hurt, but he pushed the pain aside.

The HMG finally clicked empty as the last bullet flew out, but Michael's blood lust wasn't quenched. He dropped the weapon, moving forward into the death ground he had created, littered with the bodies of Elites and Brutes. Those surviving Covenant forces had started to retreat, but with the firing stopped they regained their courage and started to move forward again. That was exactly what Michael wanted as he picked up the Brute gravity hammer off the ground and moved into the advancing aliens—

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The fighting only went on for another twenty minutes, but to Michael it felt like it had gone on for an eternity. For him the fighting seemed to move in slow motion, but he knew that he was moving at blinding speeds using every ounce of his enhanced reflexes to kill.

\_This is what I was made for— I was made to be the ultimate killing machine—\_

Michael found himself standing amongst the dead and shattered remains of the attacking Covenant forces. A few of the Brutes had run away while the Elites refused to run. Michael couldn't even think about pursuing them or what he was going to do next. He was spent. His body was drenched in sweat, he was breathing hard and he knew that he had numerous injuries from the fighting. None that were too serious, but his whole body throbbed in pain.

He looked around and there was no movement — neither human or Covenant. Michael was suddenly struck by the silence.

There was no sound except for the wind blowing. It was an eerie sound and caused his soul to shudder. It sounded like the voice of death blowing over this battlefield...

\_Everyone is deadâ€| I'm still aliveâ€| Yes, I'm alive, but what does that actually mean?\_

He stood there finally getting control of his breathing.

\_What do I do now? Where do I go?\_

He was trying to figure out his next moves, when his com channel crackled. At first there was nothing but static, but he thought he heard a faint voice. The com channel continued to crackle and pop with static, but then a voice came through quite clearly.

"Sierra-113â€| Do you read? Over. Sierra-113 respond?"

Michael took a deep breath as he opened the channel, "Sierra-113 here. Identify yourself? Over."

He heard an audible sigh over the com channel.

"Thank god Sierra-113! This is Pelican-498. We've been looking for you. We didn't think you were still aliveâ€| "

Michael was confused, "What do you want Pelican-498?"

"Send us your NAV co-ordinates. We're picking you upâ€| "

"Picking me up? Where am I going?"

"We have orders to get you off planet..."

"Negative Pelican-498. I'm staying here. I'm needed hereâ€| "

"That's a negative Sierra-113. Admiral Whitcomb has implemented 'Babylon Falling'."

At those words, Michael felt his heart freeze. Those words meant that any remaining UNSC forces were to be evacuated and New Constantinople was to be abandoned no matter how many civilians were left. The planet was to be written off.

Michael hesitated and then responded, "Negative, I'll stay..."

Another sigh came over the com channel, "We read you Sierra-113. The Admiral thought you might say that. This order comes direct from him, you are to board this Pelican and evac the planet."

Thoughts and feelings washed through Michael and he found that he was numb and didn't know what he was feeling and couldn't decide what to do.

"Sierra-113, we're ten minutes from your position. We are the last ride off this planet. There is a frigate hiding in a polar orbit waiting for usâ€| " there was a pause.

"This war is far from over and you're still needed."

Michael sighed as his training came through to overcome what he was feeling, "Copy that Pelican-498, I'll pop red smoke to mark my position."

"Roger that Sierra-113. See you in a few!"

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael stood at an observation window on the frigate UNSC Dark Nights. The ship was breaking orbit and heading out system to jump to SlipSpace to return to friendly territory. He looked down at the planet that he had spent some of the longest time of his life on. He was looking at the night-time side of the planet, he could see bright spots which indicated huge fires raging and where the Covenant were glassing the planet with their plasma weapons to remove all traces of human existence from this once habitable world.

Again the faces of the people he had met there flowed through his head. He saw each and every person clearly. It was his enhanced memory, it was useful, but right now it felt like a curse.

\_Maybe in time. Maybe I'll forget them\_

He knew it was wishful thinking. He knew he would live with these memories for the rest of his life, however long that was. The words of a poem that he'd read back during his training came to him.

\_But I have promises to keep| And miles to go before I sleep\_

Michael turned, leaving the observation deck to head for his cryo-chamber for the trip home.

## 20. The End of One Road Traveledâ€|

\*\*CHAPTER TWENTY:\*\*

\*\*The End of One Road Traveledâ€|\*\*

\*\*UNSC Rampart

>October 16, 2552 â€" 0630 Ship Time<strong>

"Michaelâ€| Michaelâ€| You should be paying attention," said the somewhat annoyed electronic female voice.

"Huh? I'm listening to the briefing," Michael said in a slightly annoyed tone as he was disturbed from his rest.

"Hmmmâ€| From your suit's bio readings, I would swear that you were asleep," the female voice said in a teasing tone.

Michael sighed tiredly, "I would think that you would be the first one to cut me some slack Adriana. You know I didn't get much turnaround time from our last mission before we got tapped for this mission."

Adriana returned her own sigh, which always surprised Michael by how

human his AI could sound even after all the missions they had been through ever since they had been paired together.

"You know how serious the strategic situation is since Reach fell," Adriana said.

Michael finally opened his eyes and looked around the briefing room at the assembled men and woman as an officer presented the briefing. Michael hadn't moved his body the whole time and he'd had his helmet on, so no one in the ship's briefing room could tell he'd had his eyes closed. He had been telling Adriana the truth that he had been listening, but he'd already done a quick look through the hard copy of this briefing and had brought himself up to speed on his role for this upcoming mission.

Reach had fallen to Covenant forces nearly two months ago. With the fall of Reach, the UNSC's position had gone from critical to desperate. Most of the talk these days was about how long it would be until the Covenant found Earth and glassed it. Michael hadn't been there when the planet fell and a part of that bothered him as Reach had been basically the only home he had known his whole life and he hadn't been there to help defend it. He knew logically that one more Spartan wouldn't have mattered in the defense, but it still nagged at the back of his mind.

He stuffed those dark thoughts back down, at least he had gotten his upgrade to the new Mark VI MJOLNIR battle armor. It was a big step up from the old Mark V system and he had already put the new armor through its paces on a couple of recon and wet-ops missions, which seemed to be all he was doing these days.

\_At least it's all against the Covenant these days rather than Innies\_, he thought.

The only thing that Michael continued to maintain from 'the old days' was having the number '113' along with the UNSC emblem on his battle armor. While the other surviving Spartans had discontinued this practice, Michael still did it. It gave him a sense of connection and continuity with his past. He felt that it helped him to keep a grasp on his identity, which seemed to be harder to do as the years went by and the war dragged on.

Michael tuned in to hear the briefing officer go over this latest mission he had been assigned to. "**\*\*OPERATION BRIAR PATCH\*\***" was an ONI mission that was tasked to locate and recover Forerunner tech from a planet in the outer fringes of the galaxy. Ever since the encounter with the HALO installation by the Pillar of Autumn and John-117, ONI was hoping that they could find any Forerunner tech that the UNSC could use against the Covenant and turn the tide of the war.

Michael wasn't too optimistic on the outcome of this mission. He could read between the lines of this mission and he could sense the desperation that hung over everyone. He felt indifferent to the situation and the mission. A small part of him was alarmed at his indifference. That he had survived this long was a testament to his skill, training and luck, but he had seen so much death and destruction that he had become numb to it all (or at least that is what he tried to convince himself). He rarely took his helmet off now around other people and had isolated himself like John. It was hard

trying to make connections with people only to see them die.

The one "person" he talked to regularly was his AI â€“ Adriana. It wasn't that Michael didn't care, he was just tired. He would keep fighting and defending the human race, but he was realistic and he knew that it was only a matter of time before he was killed. He was haunted by the things he had seen and done. He found his mind wandering sometimes almost like it was trying to remember or find something that had been lost. It was a strange feeling that sometimes he had spent his whole life looking for or heading towards something, but he didn't know and couldn't put into words what it was that he was searching for or heading towards.

He did an internal shrug to put away those thoughts and feelings and focus on the upcoming mission. He may not have been too optimistic on the chances of success for this operation, but he would do his duty and his best to make sure that everyone had a chance to get back. He would never waver in that regard.

"I just wish they hadn't decided that this was the perfect time to field test a new rifle," Michael said trying to change the subject and focus on something more tangible.

Adriana let out an electronic huff, "The new M-41A pulse rifle could be a force multiplier and give you more fire power and advantage over the Covenant compared to the MA5. You would think that you would be more appreciative of this opportunity."

"Hey, I'm one for always having more firepower, but I don't like having new weapons sprung on me at the last minute and especially when we're going to be in the middle of nowhere for this OP. If this rifle actually works as advertised then I'll take ten of them," Michael said trying to contain his sarcasm and cynicism.

Adriana picked up on his sarcasm, chuckling at his response, "Be that as it may, you are still being 'asked' to field test this new weapon and report back on its use."

Michael sighed again and Adriana picked up on the tone, "What is wrong?" she asked with concern.

"I don't knowâ€¦ I guess I'm just tiredâ€¦" he replied as his thoughts started drifting back to places and people from his past.

"I'm sure we'll get some down time after this mission," Adriana said trying to reassure her Spartan.

Michael didn't reply as there always seemed to be another mission waiting for him.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

Michael was getting settled into his cryo-chamber for the Slipspace jump. Even after all these years and the hundreds of times he had been in cryo-sleep, he still got nervous about going under.

"Relax Michael, I will be here when you wake up," Adriana said to reassure him as she was familiar with his anxieties regarding cryo-sleep.

"I know Adriana. It's just hard to break old habits after all these years," he sighed.

The cruiser entered Slipspace as it would take three weeks for the ship to arrive at its destination. During his sleep, Michael's dreams were a wide range of feelings and memories about many different things, places and people that he had experienced during his life.

\*\*oOoOo\*\*

The cruiser was still in Slipspace as Michael began the process to come out of cryo-sleep. Just before he was brought out, one last dream came to him. It was a dream that he hadn't had in years. It had been so long since he'd had this dream that he had almost forgotten about the way this dream had always made him feelâ€|

\_He found himself standing on a balcony looking out at a huge blue lake surrounded by a green forest. He wasn't wearing his armor and he could feel the warmth of the sun and the gentle cool breeze on his skin. He felt a presence and turned quickly to face the potential threat. He found a young woman standing behind him. She was beautiful and looked at him with strength and something else he didn't recognize in her eyes.\_

\_For a moment that felt like an eternity, he looked into her eyes and he saw a reflection of himself in there. He could feel that they both shared something in commonâ€| painâ€| and a longing or desire for something more from this life. Michael finally broke the silence.\_

\_ "Can I stay here with you?" he asked filled with feelings that he didn't understand and confused him, but he was certain he neededâ€| that he wanted to be here with this woman.\_

\_The young woman with brunette hair stepped closer to him, smiling at him. He felt a spark go off inside him as he started to understand what he was feeling. He smiled back meeting her eyes.\_

\_After what seemed like another eternity, the young woman took his hand in hers, holding it tight. He could feel the warmth from her hand and it filled him with happiness.\_

\_The woman finally spoke to answer his question, "Soonâ€| Soon... "\_

End  
file.